

Judaism

The Truth about the Jewish Scriptures

Abstract

Christians and Jews say scripture is the place to start to understand Jewish history. It is not. Critical scholars consider that the Jewish bible is a pious fraud, containing a little history hard to discern among the fiction, propagated for theological reasons. If David once lived, but not as in the bible, the biblical stories about him are fiction. History is scientific, religious history is tendentious. Most university departments of biblical studies employ committed evangelists not skeptics, so religious history is not history. Only when scripture is corroborated by archaeological scholarship should it be accepted as history. Traditional biblical scholars are guilty of giving a religious text a factual historicity it neither seeks nor deserves. The Persian period is the earliest admissible context for the biblical romance.

Biblical history is largely myth, so the task is to show what is and what is not history using every relevant method, documentary, archaeological, anthropological, scientific, social. Such evidence shows Israel and Judah remained Canaanite until the Persians came at the end of the sixth century BC. Biblical Israel, its leaders and heroes are mainly fictional. Their victories, defeats, religious policies are inventions written no earlier than the Persian period. Some kings of Israel and Judah appear in official Assyrian king lists, inscriptions and correspondence, but the Persians ruled Assyria and Babylonia, and had access to archives which provided the historical framework for stories about biblical monarchs. The bible was historical fiction even when it was written. Pious Jews and Christians ought to realize this.

No trace of the sagas of the **Old Testament** has ever been found in any archaeological dig from Jericho to Megiddo. A fortified city that fell in a definite moment of history is an archaeological prize. At Jericho, Christian and Jewish archaeologists dug and dug. They found ancient walls thousands of years too old, and none the right age. A thick layer of burnt material above the Middle Bronze Age buildings is the highest surviving layer. No city existed when Joshua invaded. Did Jerusalem only host only one temple? Even the bible admits Jews had temples for Moabites, Ammonites and Phœnicians at Jerusalem, including a shrine to Moloch in the Vale of Hinnom where humans passed through the fire. Biblical editors suppressed the details. The most common archaeological object found in Palestine is the crudely shaped figurine of a naked goddess!

The temple at Elephantine in Egypt, according to a letter of 407 BC, existed before the Persian period, before the “return” from exile and so before the so-called second Jerusalem temple. The Yehudim were a religious group from the outset—people who worship the god, Yehouah. Ezra says the natives of Judah, who had not been deported, and wanted to help the Persian colonists build the temple—“we seek your God, as you”—had been put there by Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, deported in to worship Yehouah! There were also “the rest of the nations whom Ashurbanipal exiled and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest of the province ‘Beyond the River’”. Ezra was arguing that the Samaritans and the Am Ha Eretz were not proper worshippers of Yehouah—not proper Jews!

History tries to show how we got to the present. Modern historians have documentary, scientific and archaeological skills, but ancient historians had little of it. Ancient historians say as much about the aspirations of their time as the history they are discussing. Authors of the Jewish scriptures were unlikely to have been members of the society described in these books. They were foreign rulers writing fictional accounts of the history of a subject people to shame them before God to behave in ways acceptable to the God's choice of king—the Shahanshah. Besides the theme of shame is one of wandering and finding a land—eretz, the “earth”! It is mythology for colonists, linked to the idea of exile. It gave the various deportees an identity, an history, a cause, and a warning that it could be easily lost without obedience.

Given that most of the events described in the bible had taken place many centuries prior to the time that they were written down, it is extremely difficult to know when they are factual historical accounts and when they are partly allegorical.

Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson,

The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt

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The Divine Crisis

- Just how old is the *Old Testament*?
- Did the House of David really exist?
- Is King Solomon a fantasy?
- If Jesus was a descendant of David and Solomon and they didn't really exist, how can we know whether Jesus really existed?

William G Dever, the former head of the University of Arizona's Near Eastern studies department answers questions like this. Dever, after more than 30 seasons of fieldwork in Israel, 12 years as director of the American post-graduate research center, has been a UA professor for 22 years, and was head of the largest graduate program in Near Eastern archaeology in the world. He is a leading spokesman for American and Israeli archaeologists who oppose what he and others call a "Divine Crisis" because of "revisionists" and their ideological agenda. He, of course, has no "ideological agenda".

Work begun in the 1970s by Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters has spoiled the earlier consensus that the bible was historical, and opposite positions of “minimalists” and maximalists have emerged. The minimalists, also called “revisionists” and “nihilists”, see minimal historical value in the bible, and would radically correct Jewish history to dispose of early myths that find no basis in real history having left no trace in contemporary annals and archaeology. Maximalists, also called “literalists”, and even “fundamentalists”, see the bible as historical, and would rather revise history to fit the bible than do the reverse.

Minimalists ask of biblical texts: Who wrote them and why? Whose purpose did they serve? To whom were they addressed? The Patriarchs, Moses, Joshua and the so-called conquest, David and Solomon have all been challenged on the basis of evidence, or the profound absence of it. Nothing distinguishes Israelites from Canaanites, and the history of *Samuel* and *Kings* is basically fiction, albeit with “an often realistic and accurate setting”.

The crisis has come to a head during the last decade because the “revisionists”, mainly European scholars, argue that the Jewish bible was written, almost in its entirety, much later than traditional scholars accept—the bible was not written during the Iron Age (c 1200-600 BC) when many of its stories are set, but in the Persian (the fifth century) and Hellenistic periods (the third to first century BC). According to Thomas L Thompson, of Copenhagen, “The bible’s stories are not about history at all”.

An innocent layman, even one not particularly interested in religion, might wonder why we have to inquire into the history of Israel. It seems to be set out in astonishing detail in the Jewish scriptures—so well set out, the religious person might add, that they must be God’s word! The same layman might have the same thought about Christian origins. They too seem to be well described in the *New Testament*.

The truth is that religious history is not history. A historian wants to know what happened in history, and why, accepting that the natural world was subject to the same laws then as it is today. The religious writer wants to persuade their readers that their own religious viewpoint is the one to hold and, if they agree, to give them some moral codes to live by. In this way they hope to control their existence. History is scientific but religious history is tendentious. When history is written for some purpose other than to investigate the past then it becomes historiography—the art of the monks—polemic writing disguised as history. That is what the bible is.

To paraphrase a “revisionist”, Philip R Davies, of Sheffield University, the notion of an “ancient” or “biblical” Israel is a “modern conception”, perpetuated by Jewish and Christian writers for the same theological reasons as the writers and editors of the Jewish bible. If the revisionists are right, then the Jewish bible is a collection of myths, fantastic tales, and late religio-political propaganda—a “pious fraud” containing little history, and that little is hard to discern among the fiction.

Contradictions and Unreason

If the contention that biblical Israel is fiction is extreme, the response to legitimate questioning of biblical texts is more extreme. William G Dever blames it all on

“postmodernism” or “political correctness”, and concludes:

Ancient Israel is a fact. That this historical Israel does not correspond in all details with the ‘ideal theological Israel’ portrayed in the Hebrew bible is true. In the end, however, that is irrelevant.

Roy Vince describes the article in which this appears (*Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey*, BAR 26, 2000) as

One of the most vicious “scholarly” attacks I have ever seen.

Perhaps he has not come across Gary A Rendsburg, an odious Cornell University biblicist who seems to think he is at the “cutting edge of Jewish studies”, as he puts it. Rendsburg thinks biblical studies have gone from consensus to crisis. The consensus was that the bible contains “reliable historical information” that had been passed down “accurately”. Any contradictions are “minor problems” for the basic storyline is “trustworthy”.

The crisis is “relativism, skepticism, and indeed nihilism” which now dominates. “The arm of Marxism had spread to biblical studies”. Some minimalists “are driven by Marxism and leftist politics”. Some of them are “counterculture people, left over from the 60s and 70s, whose personality includes the questioning of authority in all aspects of their lives”. Some of them are even former evangelical Christians who now see the evils of their former ways. So, they are not all bad, then! At this rate, some of them might even be normal human beings!

Our bad-mouthing “scholar” admits W J Albright (the doyen of traditional biblicists) overstated the case, but not too seriously! His group later would come under attack by what their detractors would term parallelomania, and some of these great scholars often went too far in making connexions between the bible and the ancient world. But even though they made all these errors, at least they were clever! Minimalists are no good at anything, it seems.

Anson Rainey of Tel Aviv University has noted that Thompson, Davies, Lemche, and Whitelam (minimalist scholars) have never excavated an archaeological site or translated an archive of ancient Near Eastern texts, so they are “untrained”, and produce only “baseless twaddle”. Rendsburg goes on, “With the current group of revisionists, ideology, not objective scholarship, governs”. “If it is not actual Marxism, it is leftist politics in general”. What is more, “almost without exception, the scholars of this group are not Jewish!” They “are driven by anti-Zionism approaching anti-Semitism”. Cornell used to have a good reputation.

It is plain enough that this deep thinker slings around every insult he can find in his limited political repertory, and only succeeds in painting “idiot” all over himself. Rendsburg simply cannot see the wood for the trees. He is utterly blinded by his own rage. He quotes Robert Farrell on the Danish poem *Beowulf* because “the fact that a literary work is a literary work first and foremost, with its own agenda, does not automatically mean that it lacks any historical value altogether:”

Beowulf is a work of heroic history, a poem in which facts and chronology are

subservient to the poet's interest in heroic deeds and their value in representing the ethics of an heroic civilization. A poet writing in this mode does not disregard absolute historical fact, history, that is, as we know it. He rather sees it as less important than other considerations... His account will sometimes mesh reasonably well with history, as in the episode of Hygelac's raid on the Frisian shore. But more often, his work will be a freely woven structure in which the characters and actions of the past will be part of an ethically satisfying narrative. Robert Farrell

Rendsburg comments:

The same words could apply to the Torah. The narrative is based on historical facts known to the author, but the author is more interested in presenting an "ethically satisfying narrative". So while the author "does not disregard absolute historical fact, history, that is", these facts take a back seat to the main thrust of the story.

Shakespeare's histories are literary creations, but one would not deny the actual existence of the kings themselves. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* has a 1950s agenda, but the basic story line of the Salem witch hunts of colonial Massachusetts is historically accurate. And Robert Altman's film *M*A*S*H* and the television series which followed speak clearly to the 1960s and 1970s anti-Vietnam War generation, but this does not mean that the Korean War is a fictional invention of the writers.

These citations show that Rendsburg has lost his track. He has forgotten what he is talking about. If he has not, then he never knew, and he is saying that others need training. Yet the minimalist argument is simple.

He is quite right to say that Beowulf is similar to the Jewish scriptures, in that the authors do not disregard historical fact, but these facts take a back seat to their main purpose. Minimalists agree! That is what they are saying! Literary books might contain history, but without reference to external evidence no one knows what it is!

Shakespeare's historical plays contain history, and so does *Beowulf*, *The Crucible* and *M*A*S*H*, but Rendsburg has forgotten that we already know what is history and what is drama in these cases. We know that King Henry V was based in history and King Lear was not. If we did not know, then we might suppose Lear to be historical because the other plays are about historical kings. Much of the Jewish scriptures is King Lear—it bears little relationship to history, as Rendsburg seems to concur—and what is, like Henry V, based on history we do not know without external evidence. He concludes:

There still can be history in these texts, even if we would not wish to create true history based on these texts alone. Obviously, the narrative cannot be taken at face value for the recovery of ancient Israelite history. But at the same time, especially when a variety of sources from the ancient Near East confirms elements of the biblical narrative, we are absolutely justified in using the bible as a source for recovering the early history of Israel.

He gives an example. A text from Ugarit includes a trade agreement between merchants of Ugarit and those of Ur (Urfa, the birthplace of Abraham) negotiated by the king of the Hittites, as both cities were his. The merchants of Ur could trade in Ugarit, but could not buy land or property, or settle permanently there. In *Genesis*

34:10, the people of Shechem offer Jacob and his family these same three rights:

And ye shall dwell with us: and the land shall be before you; dwell and trade ye therein, and get you possessions therein.

So, *Genesis* 34:10 seems to reflect real history of roughly the right time for Jacob. QED, Rendsburg seems to think. But it took the Ugarit tablets to confirm it as other than fiction, and even then we are not sure it is history unless we know that the three elements are peculiar to the time and place and not common to agreed resettlement elsewhere in the ANE BC.

Is this arrogant and insulting “intellectual” really so blind or ignorant that he cannot see that he is epitomising the minimalist position, and not refuting it. Minimalists say precisely that “the narrative cannot be taken at face value for the recovery of ancient Israelite history”, and precisely that the Jewish scriptures are indeed only valid “when a variety of sources from the ancient Near East” confirms them. Quite frankly, there is only one conclusion from this astonishing example of McGill and Cornell “scholarly” debate. The man is so emotionally entangled in an irrational hatred that he has lost his marbles. Is it the function of prestigious universities and their publications to give a platform for such manic hate and unreason?

Biblical Archaeology

Oddly, Professor Dever, in his understanding of Israel’s early formative years, recognizes he differs little from the revisionists, despite his huffing and puffing. Dever counts himself among those who accept the Jewish scriptures “to the extent that it can be corroborated by archaeological scholarship”. He wrote a popular book to “isolate a core history, using archaeology as a supplement and corrective to the text of the Hebrew bible where it is biased, exaggerated, or too selective to be an adequate source for history”.

Dever provoked the “biblical archaeology” debate in the 1970s about whether “biblical archaeology” might be better termed “Syro-Palestinian archaeology”.

1. Biblical does not mean a single period but a literary genre. There is no Iliadic Archaeology or Beowulfic Archaeology.
2. “Biblical” is too broad a term. Anywhere mentioned in the bible over 2000 years might be considered biblical.
3. Biblical refers to nothing that archaeologists do as archaeologists, excavating, cataloguing finds, tracing the development and evolution of material culture.

Dever’s reasonable case lost, even though most full-time archaeologists from the United States and virtually all from Europe and Israel favored Dever’s suggestion. Biblicists and theologians did not. Furthermore, Ziony Zevit in *Biblica* 83 (2002) tells us frankly:

The overwhelming majority of excavators interested in biblical periods who work in Israel and Jordan were not full-time archaeologists. Most are employed at seminaries or denominational institutions where they teach Bible or courses with names like

“Ancient Israelite Civilization”.

They refused a terminology that did not declare clearly that this archaeology was biblical. Even more important to them was that the new terminology would have made it harder for biblical phonies to get financial support from patrons and institutions for their phony scholarship, and to recruit gullible believers for their amateur archaeology.

They argued “biblical” was appropriate as long as it was understood as meaning a particular people in a particular place and time—Israelites in the Land of Israel from the Iron Age until the days of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Persian period which followed the Iron Age, c 1200-332 BC, or even Jesus, Paul and the early church. It was similar in this sense to “Roman” or “Greek” applied to branches of classical archaeology. K F Kell had long ago defined biblical archaeology thus:

By biblical archaeology or knowledge of antiquity we mean the scientific representation of the way of life of the Israelite people as the only nation of antiquity that God had selected as bearer of revelations recorded in the Bible.

This archaeology is not scientific but a branch of exegetical theology. So, theologians would not let go of it, even though it begs the question. Indeed, because it does!

Dever must have been attacking, rightly, those using biblical theology for archaeological interpretation, though he was chary about raising it as an issue in public. The reason was most biblical scholars assumed that, if archeology could demonstrate that something might have occurred, then when the bible so indicated, it *had* occurred. This is called euphemistically “giving the bible the benefit of the doubt”. It is given this large degree of benefit because God wrote it. Such “bible is true” thinking gave the biblicist scholars a halo that seemed to make these Enochs think they were walking with God. “Predications were raised to prominence as proclamation while events tested and not found wanting were esteemed as witnesses to the proclamation. Events found wanting, such as the enslavement of Israelites in Egypt, were classified as myth, their lack of historicity ignored”.

Dever lost the debate because there are many more bible teachers in the world than archaeologists. Theologically driven biblicists wanted to retain their claim over archaeological data. Dogma defeated enquiry, religion dictated to science.

Syro-Palestinian archaeology *was* accepted in professional circles, and is now used in departments of archaeology, anthropology and history. Biblical archaeology became a word used by Christian popularisers and apologists in their propaganda publicised in magazines and popular books, mostly pandering to people’s ideas half remembered from schooldays and thought possibly to have some truth. Zevit concludes:

The debate had precipitated changes beyond professional terminology. It had disseminated the notion that the Albrightian synthesis of biblical studies and archaeology no longer maintained its integrity...

Dever categorically assures us that biblical archaeology is “long since dead” and “few mourn its passing”, yet the term biblical archaeology is still used by scholars to mean

the interface between proper Levantine archaeology and biblical studies. Do those who use the term biblical archaeology know that it now has this restricted sense, or could they still be labouring under the impression that it was what it formerly was? If the scholars do know, do the clergymen and the earnest preachers of the Word also know? Should someone tell them? Many of these people are quoting selectively from modern workers, or superceded work to support their mythical beliefs.

In Dever's view as a professional archaeologist, "The bible is about real people in a real time and place—like us". In short, he is like the notorious Albright, an archaeologist who achieved world fame by refusing to let archaeology speak for itself, but incessantly forced it into the straitjacket of the biblical account of Jewish history. Joel Sweek says, about Dever:

Dever, while having at one time given out the suggestion of opposition to biblical archaeology, nonetheless can write passages that sound neo-Albrightian.

Only when revisionist biblical scholars began to invoke archaeological data, having lost confidence in the biblical texts as sources for history writing did archaeologists working in Israel become involved. Dever, like Rainey, says non-specialists are simply not competent to deal with the mass of complex data that will soon truly revolutionize the writing of ancient Israel's history and religions, rather than the fashion for revisionist theories. Like Rainey, Dever criticizes Philip Davies, as a revisionist, for not being an archaeologist, as if only archaeologists can understand archaeologists.

If this is true then archaeologists might as well be confined to their own asylum. The point of archaeology must be to illuminate history. If this is not its point, then it has only one other possible purpose—to confuse history by digging away whatever might actually illuminate it if read properly, and by issuing utterly false accounts of what has been found. If the archaeologists genuinely seek to illuminate history but refuse to give accounts of their work that are intelligible to non-archaeologists, then again their discipline is valueless for the majority of us. Once archaeologists have clearly explained what they have found, there is no reason at all why historians who are not archaeologists should not interpret it. The archaeologists can present us with their data but we are not obliged to accept their opinions, especially when we have better ones. One suspects that this is one of Dever's problems.

Anyway, Davies is not an archaeologist but he is a well qualified Hebrew scholar. He wants to know why the Jewish scriptures were written, not to prove them unhistorical, but to know what purpose they were meant to serve. Dever, is an archaeologist all right, but he is not a Hebrew scholar. If he criticizes Davies for not understanding archeology, he can be criticized for failing to understand critical biblical scholarship. Like most Christians, Dever needs no scholarship to know why the bible exists, but Davies is trying to find out. It is a legitimate study.

The Bible is not a text of transcendental authority but a collection of human writings.

P Davies

Writing of Thomas L Thompson seeing the Persian period as the earliest admissible context for the biblical romance, Dever calls him a "nihilist". Davies also thinks the Jewish scriptures were written in the Persian period. N P Lemche, another

minimalist, thinks the scriptures are even later—Hellenistic. Lemche has said he thinks the Tel Dan stele might be a fake. Baruch Halpern, who has adopted a stand against minimalism, thinks David is historical, but does not think the David of history is the biblical one. Even so the bible is not fiction. Yet, if David once lived but not as described in the bible, then it *is* fiction. Most critical biblical scholars consider that *Genesis-Judges* contains no reliable history, and they agree the scriptures emerged in their modern shape in the Persian period after the so-called “Return” from exile.

So, minimalism differs not a lot from the scholarly mainstream. The question is whether the scriptures were written then or simply edited. The bible aims to give the impression it is contemporary history, but it is an assumption based on the bible's own chronology. The purpose of scholarship is to test assumptions. But those who seek out tenable theories to explain the nature of the Jewish scriptures are “nihilists” while dead heads that believe in a supernatural ogre playing toy soldiers with the human race are purveying pure truth as golden sunbeams. We should be seeking to understand the reasons for what we see in the ground, confident that the finger of God has nothing to do with it, but human motives, movements and ideologies do.

Dever admits that his views of the Patriarchal period and the Exodus are as minimalist as any minimalist. He must mean that he accepts they are mythical. But he is not at all minimalist about the Iron Age and the United Monarchy. Dever accuses “revisionists”, who deny any state of Israel before about 850 BC of “ignorance”, and adds that Israel Finkelstein, who Dever recognizes as being the authority on the Iron Age sites of Palestine, holds a minority view in asserting no ethnic distinctions can be made from the evidence, and there is no basis for distinguishing an “early Israel” in the early Iron Age. Plainly, people lived in the Palestinian hills in the twelfth century BC but only biblicists call them Israelites as opposed to Canaanites, like the rest of the population.

So, when Dever refers to the Iron Age or “Israelite” period, he classifies himself. He wants revisionists to refute the data, in typical evangelic style, as if the data are unequivocal. What the revisionists do is refute the biblicist interpretation. The inference that there is any sign of cultural change in the data that might suggest a different people appearing is what is refutable. As Finkelstein declares, there is no such sign. The data show continuity of occupation. One thing only impels biblicists to see phantom signs—their reading of the bible!

Dever is keen on showing the unanimity of those who support the idea of the scriptures being written in the Iron Age. “I and all other archaeologists I know (along with most mainstream biblical scholars) put the context in the Iron Age”. So all the archaeologists he knows are in the same camp as mainstream biblical scholars—presumably that can only mean they accept the finger wagging view of history. But what does he mean by putting “the context in the Iron Age?” The Jewish scriptures are set entirely in the Iron Age. It has no other context. It could have been written in its entirety at the end of the Iron Age in the Persian period, but could not have been written at the court of king David, as biblicists want to believe. He has to concede that these miraculously early histories were edited “rather late”.

Dever maintains a larger issue is “How do we know what we claim to know? How can we communicate that knowledge with any confidence?” Dever blames the lack of

rationality he thinks he perceives on postmodernism, and its weapon, “deconstruction”, challenging the “positivist paradigm” of the Enlightenment, attacking reason and science as the basis of knowledge. Deconstruction, he says, approaches any text, ancient or modern, with suspicion, tearing it apart to reveal its supposed “inner contradictions”. Such “scholars” deny the book or work of art any inherent meaning. Ideology and politics—especially race, gender, and class—became the issues, not rationality. Deconstruction, Dever says, tends to intellectual anarchy and to anti-establishment politics. The “assault on reason” and radical reinterpretation of all ancient texts might pose a threat to the Western cultural tradition, founded as it is on the twin pillars of the biblical word-view and the modern Enlightenment.

It is difficult, subject to this criticism, to stand on any ground other than that on which Dever himself stands. If you offer evidence that a biblical text is mythical, then you are rejected as being postmodern, a grievous insult implying you will not believe *any* documentary evidence. If you take a milder line and suggest that a biblical text is equivocal and offer an ideological reason why it might have been written rather than a supernatural one, then you are turning the biblical writers “on their heads” and treating them as “guilty until they are proven innocent”. Become more conciliatory still and suggest tentatively that biblical history might have been romanticized, then you are making out that “all knowledge” is just a “social construct”. The biblicist position is that any critic of the bible is an extremist until they accept that the bible is the true account of God’s finger wagging in Jewish history.

Dever says the revisionists are off target “for all the noise” they make, and complains that they attack him as their *bête noire* while leaving others with the same views unmolested. The reason is plain enough. It is Dever who makes the noise because he is outraged that the revisionist view should be put at all. He repeatedly dismisses revisionists as being off the mainstream, an isolated but vocal minority. But he cannot resist his self imposed role as bulldog—the revisionist’s most persistent challenger in print. Of course, by writing a load of irate polemic to add to his 250 other papers, he can give himself more material to boost his self-citations.

Dever’s more serious charge is that revisionists, like Keith W Whitelam of Sterling University, have politicized archaeology by accusing American, and especially Israeli, archaeologists of conspiring to “rob the Palestinians of their history” through their tendentious support for biblical mythology. Dever’s concern is that eliminating “ancient Israel” from history will challenge modern Israel’s right to exist. He concludes: “This challenge cannot go unmet”.

In Israel, A Elon, a novelist, and Y Shavat, a historian, claim that the Israeli passion for archaeology—verging on a mania, according to Dever—is a secular religion, a sentiment for a lost past when God was your neighbour and the Good were safe. Surely this is precisely what biblical religions are. Tel Dan has been developed by the Israeli National Parks Authority, but is labelled by them in such an outrageously biblicist way that one suspects even they would blush. Then again, no. Yet, the “Haredin” of Israel, the ultra-orthodox right wing Jews, are violently opposed to archaeology, claiming that archaeologists are desecrating the sacred land.

Really they fear that scientific investigation will disprove their religious tradition.

Ninety percent of fieldwork in Israel is sponsored by the Israeli government and subsidised by American institutions, and excavations are staffed by American students. Who would come to dig in these hot and unpleasant conditions except those who were motivated by a conviction that they were digging up God? Few indeed, and if this few, dedicated to archaeology rather than God, wanted to make archaeology of the Levant a career, they would be unlikely to get a post. The American university departments of biblical studies and biblical archaeology want committed evangelists, not skeptics. In any case, the university departments themselves are getting more cautious after modern archaeologists have dug down to the roots of the bible stories and found them rotten. Dever says the discipline of biblical archaeology in the US is dying and its funds drying up, even though popular interest is great. One might think *because* it is!

Criticizing Postmodernism

Postmodernists often *do* seem to want to evade problems rather than solve them. Dever' points about the "scholarship" of deconstruction compared with careful cross-checking of source material to attempt to approach objectivity is surely valid. Deconstruction techniques might give a scholar some insights but, since these can hardly be anything other than subjective, they cannot alone be acceptable to anyone seeking some sort of objective truth.

David Clines of Sheffield University, explicitly presenting a postmodern agenda for biblical studies, says the tradition of scholarship does not matter very much, because the tradition enshrined and promoted the principles common to both dogmatic and modernist scholarship, the principles of a unified truth and a common quest for that truth that we were all engaged in—and "grand narratives" like that no longer carry conviction. Meaning matters too, but not some one right meaning because there is no such thing, but everyone's meanings for that is all there is.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi agrees with Clines and defends postmodernist exegesis by asserting:

It is an error to construe postmodernism as a nihilist denial of meaning.

What it rejects is privileged claims on behalf of some essential meanings that persist in time through language or words.

According to deconstruction, the futile quest for authoritative, original meaning or permanent meaning is a misapprehension of what meaning is or how it operates.

The postmodernists sound as contrary as Professor Dever. Eskenazi's last statement contradicts the first. Words have a meaning intended by the author, and the fact that the words later do not seem clear is not to deny that the author had an intention to convey a particular meaning. Like many of these classically trained people calling themselves biblical scholars, she does not understand science, and thinks in terms of the creeds they are used to. Religions, not science, make "privileged claims on behalf of some essential meanings that persist in time through language or words". An

“authoritative” meaning is quite different from a “permanent” one, and an original one might be neither. Religious souls believe in permanent meaning not scientific ones who know that discovery might require an authoritative interpretation to change.

The fact that postmodernists do not believe objectivity should be aimed for is reason enough for rational minds to reject it, but Dever uses it as a weapon, accusing his critics of postmodernism so that they can be written off. In the same way, critics of conventional dating are written off as Velikovskian, but these are just sad ploys by people who have run out of arguments. Perfection in anything is impossible but that is no reason why anyone should not aim for perfection. The same is true of objectivity. It might be impossible but it is up to critics to show how it falls short and might be approached more closely, rather than saying, “It’s hopeless. Let’s forget about truth and make everything up”.

Postmodernists note the axis of myth and history, with myth at the fictional pole and history at the factual pole, then note that history is often partly if not largely fictionalized while myth might be allegorical history and therefore contain historical truths. Apparently this is too hard for them to face, so they have come up with the “solution” of abolishing the distinction between history and myth. Instead it is all narrative to be essentially disbelieved except for whatever the reader decides to believe, having “deconstructed” the text! Any attempt to decide the degree of validity of a text by comparing it with agreed historical fact is for the birds. The acceptance of inbuilt bias that might be allowed for, or at least highlighted, seems insufficient for the postmodernist. Subjective writing cannot be avoided and so objectivity is discredited and discarded.

For postmodernists, there is no purpose in history, it just happens. Indeed, there is no purpose in history—it was not thinking about it, it does not have any aim—but the historian can look at history like a god. He knows what happened, he can see what happened before it, and what happened then. So he can ask, with hindsight, what influence previous events had on later ones. The purpose in history is the historian’s in trying to decide why some event happened in terms of previous causes. Other historians might disagree. It is out of the debate that ensues that truth emerges.

Somehow or other, God, the One God, comes into Jewish history, and all the other gods go out and finally dissolve into sheer nothingness, mere fancies of the ignorant.

T R Glover

Objective History

To judge a story’s historicity by its degree of realism is to mistake verisimilitude for historicity. Verisimilitude is the literary term for the illusion of reality. Just because a story sounds real does not mean that it is. Realistic fiction is just as fictional as nonrealistic fiction.

Adele Berlin, *J Biblical Literature* (2001)

It can be said that objective history is impossible, as it is, but natural and inevitable bias is quite distinct from deliberately composing history to support a religious view. All good historians try to recognize prejudice and try to correct it whether in others or themselves. The historiographer is not interested in what is or was true but in what

upholds a chosen view. It might be said that any revisionist is therefore a historiographer, and perhaps in a sense that is true, but the revisionist is nevertheless trying to correct an error to get at the historical truth. Revisionists are not trying to hide truth to uphold a dogma. When a bias can be seen in some historical work, the revisionist will try to point it out and correct it. The reader has access to both views and can judge.

The historiographer will not be challenged. Religious writers all lean in much the same direction, squabbling over arcane details to give an illusion of scholarship when they are all agreed on the bulk of the religious edifice they have. The reader, if unprepared, will get enmeshed in this esoteric quibbling about how God meant His bad communicating to be interpreted, and will finish up praying to empty space for help, by which time it is too late to get any.

Religious works that purport to be history cannot be assumed to be accurate until confirmed by independent means. It is not safe to accept, with the guardians of religion, that we should accept religious history unless it is proven wrong. It is safer to take the skeptical scientific view that it is myth, or at best legend, until it is proven true.

Nor can the logical jump be made that it is all correct because something in it has been shown to be historical—historiography often takes the form of historical fiction. It is put in a historical setting that might be more or less convincing, but a convincing setting cannot vouchsafe the central plot. This should be plain today—plainer than it ever was—because historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy fiction are commonly presented to us on TV, the silver screen, video games and in books. All give us an acceptable period setting for fictional stories. Are we to suppose that people 2000 or even 3000 years ago—only 30 or 40 lifetimes distant—could not write fiction? They could, and many ancient papyri and stelae prove it by exaggerrating the exploits of the king who commissioned the work.

Biblical History

So, we have good reason to question the history of the Jews and the Christians. They will not, so we must. We immediately find our suspicions confirmed, but the walls of the established religions are not so unsteady as those of Jericho. N P Lemche published *Early Israel. Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy* in 1985 but attracted little attention. G Garbini in *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, New York (1988) attacked theological interpretations of history that countenanced the theologizing historiography of the biblical texts as historical statements.

Garbini is Professor of Semitic Philology in the University of Rome, essentially a philologist and archaeologist with a specific interest in the history of Israel, and is neither Jew nor Christian, but part of the wider circle of ancient historians.

John Bowden

But P R Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, Sheffield (1992) opened up the debate and invited the description "biblical minimalists" and the even less flattering ones. The same year, T L Thompson published a book reaching similar conclusions, *Early History of the Israelite People. From the Written and Archaeological Sources*,

Leiden (1992).

Ziony Zevit does not agree with the biblical minimalists, but thinks they are “much maligned by Biblicists and historians”, though they are engaged in a legitimate historical undertaking. Yet Zevit seems to like to be all things to all men. He has written an 80 page introduction on method to his fat textbook (*The Religions of Ancient Israel*), but abandons basic principles when it comes to the Jewish scriptures:

Although a skeptical position concerning the facticity of the contents of these narratives is justified in some cases eg Jericho and Ai, blanket denial that any facticity adheres to any aspect of the narratives... is not warranted automatically...

Regrettably, for his scientific credentials, it is! He knows, or ought to know, that documentary evidence cannot be trusted at all when parts of it are known to be false, and when it is known that the author has an agenda other than recording the historic truth. Both of these apply to the scriptures, and Zevit would not disagree. How then can anything in the Jewish scriptures be accepted as factual automatically? The rules say the opposite. A blanket denial that anything in them is true should be automatic. Skepticism about factuality is warranted. If huge swaths of the book are wrong, or even dubious, then none of the rest can be assumed to be correct. That is proper method, and students who accept Zevit on this will be taught wrongly.

In his textbook, he does not want to explain why he disagrees with the minimalists, even though much of his own research upholds their views, simply adding, in a similar vein:

Those who deny any facticity or historicity for the events in which David, Solomon and subsequent rulers took part, events described in ***Samuel-Kings***, err grievously in that they ignore textual, inscriptional and archeological data.

He must hope that this is sufficient for his readers for he does not offer to say what these evidences are that he says the minimalists grievously err in omitting. Did they do it because they are stupid, or did they do it, like biblicists because they want to protect God from His detractors? The truth is that they do not have a reason to tell lies unlike the biblicists. They are therefore more likely to be trying to seek the truth, but truth is not what biblicists want. The truth, then, is that there is no such evidence for Saul, Solomon and a good many kings of Israel and Judah, except what is in the bible, and the bible is precisely what is in question. No data are ignored. There are often no data to support the bible. It is the biblicists who ignore its absence and carry on regardless. Saying that minimalists are ignoring the “textual data”, meaning the bible, is like saying that Greek historians ignore the textual data about Oedipus, Odysseus or Pegasus, the flying horse, meaning Homer and the Greek myths.

All proper historians are trained to require adequate answers to certain questions about any written documents before they decide how they can be used:

- What is the nature of this document?
- Who wrote it?
- Who benefits from this document?

- When was it written and why?
- Where was it written?

The Jewish scriptures make up a constitution for the Jewish people to whom they were given. The earliest time that rules like reading the Torah publicly and observing its charges faithfully, abstention from work and commerce on the sabbath, avoiding intermarriage, tithing, maintaining temple sacrifice through a self-imposed tax (*Neh* 10:30-40) could appear is when Ezra and Nehemiah were sent by the Persian king during the fifth century BC to determine civil and religious policy in Yehud.

Textual examination of the books of the scriptures shows that they could not have been written in the times they claim to have been. Moses cannot have written the *Pentateuch* in 1500 BC or even 1300 BC; Isaiah could not have written his book in 700 BC.

Moreover, the books are not uniform within themselves and so are not written by a single author, but by different hands at different times. The period intervening between the supposed events and when they were set to paper is explained by historiographers as a period of oral transmission. It never occurs to them that the gap is better explained by the author being a fiction writer.

They use the poems of Homer describing the siege of Troy as a parallel because Homer wrote in 800 BC when the siege of Troy was in 1200 BC. Yet the bulk of Homer's works were romance, even if they were based on recollections of real events. And Troy has been discovered but no trace of an exodus of two million people from Egypt has. Nor has any unequivocal trace of a kingdom of David or an empire of Solomon. We can be certain that the scriptural accounts of these events are fictional and no amount of explaining away by Jewish and Christian believers can alter it.

Garbini had already dated biblical compositions to the Persian and Hellenistic periods, and minimalists conclude that the books of the Jewish bible were written then. The historical books are fictional histories based on earlier legends or less refined fictions, through which the local Persian colonists provided themselves with a mythic past that linked them to the land and to a religion. Zivit points out that this conclusion has two important corollaries:

1. Bible narratives about the political, social, and intellectual world of ancient Israel from Abraham to the temple's destruction lack probative value.
2. Any narrative about the actual people living in the central mountain areas of Palestine during the Iron Age must be based on archaeological data alone.

No archaeological data or any data external to the bible itself confirm the patriarchal or exodus stories as narrated in *Genesis* and *Exodus*. Only with qualified explanations can archaeological data be drafted to support some elements in the *Joshua-Judges* narratives. If Egyptian slaves escaped in dribs and drabs over a period of 400 years and were joined from time to time by bands of wandering Arab shepherds, then we do not have a biblical exodus! If these runaway slaves and nomads settled in Palestine over a long time span, then we do not have a conquest and we do not have a Joshua! Is that clear? you at the back!

The patriarchal narratives were first told by colonists from Syria who were settled in

the Palestinian hills, but the proto-exodus-conquest narratives were written by the colonists to explain the law which they had to obey because it was imposed by the Persians whose enemy was the Egyptians, and to allegorize the century of struggles by the colonists to establish their hegemony over the native Canaanites.

Historical Israel, the actual flesh and blood people who dwelt in the central mountains during the Iron Ages, didn't come from Egypt. They were descendents of earlier, Bronze Age inhabitants of the places where they lived. Their culture and religion was a slightly evolved form of the earlier, Bronze Age Canaanite ones.

All the factual evidence we have is that the culture of the Hill Country of Palestine called Israel and Judah remained Canaanite until the Persians came at the end of the sixth century BC. Only in the following century were books about Jewish history written down. The people of Israel, its leaders and heroes are literary fictions or inventions or constructs. Stories about them, their victories, defeats, religious policies are all late concoctions written at the earliest in the Persian period.

Even when the stories were written down in a book, it was not treated, as it is by simple Christians today, as the unalterable word of God. The history of Israel given in *Chronicles* is not the same as that given in *Samuel* and *Kings*, just as the gospel of John is not the same as the gospel of Mark. Readers of the bible should realize that it was not written in one sitting. The Persians began it using various older legends and the available annals, the Greeks of the Ptolemies added Hellenistic romances, and the Maccabees added more of them and justified the free state. Some of these early legends and proto-histories were greatly elaborated as Hellenistic romances perhaps in the third and even the second centuries BC.

Contrary to what their detractors believe, minimalists take the historical writings seriously. Some events of the bible are confirmed by external investigation. Some of the kings of Israel and Judah appear in Assyrian records and therefore can be dated. However, given that the history of Israel was only first written in the Persian period, and the Persians had conquered Assyria and Babylonia, and had access to their archives covering hundreds of years, it is more than likely that the scriptural stories of the monarchical period were simply written from the official king lists, inscriptions and diplomatic correspondence of those formerly mighty powers. In short, it is largely historical fiction but set in a realistic historical framework. For those who are Jews and Christians and want to explore history, they should realize this.

Although minimalist claims are derived through reasoning processes practiced by contemporary historians, and constitute a valid and necessary undertaking, they shocked biblical scholarship by their boldness and in their assignment of biblical historiography to the genre of apologetic mythmaking and "big lie" propaganda methods. Davies challenged his readers to decide if they were truly historians or believers masquerading as historians. Did they intend to introduce theological concerns to their analyses?

Is reconstructing "ancient Israel" a historical undertaking or a theological one? If theology is part of the argument, then it can no longer be scholarship, which has to be free of religious commitments to avoid bias. Davies thought belief was more important to biblicist motivation than truth or knowledge. Davies's statements were considered an attack on the intellectual integrity of those who thought they could

hold religious faiths and still be objective scholars. Common sense says that they cannot.

Both Judaism and Christianity are supposed to reject idolatry—the venerating of material objects above God. Yet, to regard the bible as, in any way, infallible is to treat it as a god. The rabbis, indeed, are particular in their monotheism to point out that nothing outside of heaven is perfect, and so the bible (they specify *Torah*) cannot be infallible. The good historian here agrees—the veneration of any earthly writing must be eschewed. Those who cannot had better be honest enough to become theologians instead of pretending to be historians or archaeologists.

The sad thing is that non-religious historians think religiously motivated historians are honest and so leave the religious fieldwork to them. Some religiously motivated historians do deserve praise and much of what we *do* know, they have uncovered, but they have done so like a patient taking the dressing from their own wound—slowly and with a lot of grimacing!

In summary, minimalists exposed the overt influences of theological assumptions in the interpretation of Biblical literature. Their concentration on the importance of the Persian period should lead to more scholarship being concentrated here to rectify the obfuscation and neglect of earlier times.

A Proper Approach to Religious History

Scholarship has shown that there is a lack of correlation between the Israel of biblical history and that of actual history. It is no longer possible to use traditional methods of historically conditioned scriptural readings to gain access to the historical people of Israel. We therefore either need to look elsewhere or change our response to the text... The text might not reveal actual history but it does point to a religious and social reality concerning those that wrote it...

Benjamin J Cliff Bury, University of Birmingham, UK, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*

What is needed now is for objective historians to take over religious history and place it in its proper context. The bible should be ignored until external evidence shows that something in it is valid. God should be ignored as a cantankerous supernatural personality stirring up the affairs of humanity with His index finger. Anyone with such an absurd and childish belief should be relieved of their academic positions, and the many useless and unproductive departments of theology should be abandoned and their funds transferred to proper history or ancient language departments.

If this were ever done we could hope to make huge strides in the confusion of Near Eastern history, much of which remains quite baffling, despite being recorded for 5000 years, because it is always packed into the biblical jam jar and is never allowed to display its own shape. The Assyrians and particularly their disciples, the Persians will prove to be the founders of the Jewish strand of monotheism, and the history of the Jews will become part of the history of the many small kingdoms set up in the Levant of the Iron Age before the Assyrians and then the Persians absorbed them into empire.

In using old records, chronicles and inscriptions, the historian has to be alert to the fact that that the writer might be writing propaganda. Kings want to glorify

themselves not admit their failures, so a battle won might really have been inconclusive and a battle lost might be omitted altogether, and will have to be sought in the records of the victors. Knowing this, biblical historians ought to be aware of the possibility of such tendencies in the scriptures, yet most firmly set themselves against such thoughts, or only accept them grudgingly when they are forced upon them.

What is needed now for progress to be made is a change in paradigm. The scriptural paradigm of Jews and Christians traditionally is that of a gradual revelation of God to His Chosen People through the medium of their history. To state it thus is enough for any proper historian to reject it. The paradigm that should replace it is that of scriptures written by world conquerors intent on pacifying and intimidating their vassals to act as watchers upon a larger and dangerous country subject to the same world power and known to be rebellious. The world power was Persia and the dangerous subject nation was Egypt.

The Christian and Jew will say that the scriptures are the natural place to start to understand Jewish history, but they are the last place to start if bias and pitfalls are to be avoided. Biblical history is largely myth, but the task is to show what is and what is not, within the parameters available, using every technique that is relevant, documentary, archaeological, anthropological, scientific, social and so on. Ideally, the budding historian of the Near East should read what has been discovered about Near Eastern history from other sources first. Since this is probably impossible for anyone brought up in our culture, they should begin by firmly believing that all of the bible is myth and forgetting it while they get a historical picture first. Only then should they turn to the scriptures to try to understand who, writing hundreds of years later would want to invent a bogus history for the Jews.

Doubtless, it seems old hat to postmodernists, but how can pure subjectivity do better? If “deconstruction” is interpreted as “textual criticism”, in which evidences of the author’s prejudices are adduced then that is fine—it is constructive despite its name. But, if the rhetoric of postmodernism is to be believed, it replaces enquiry after truth with fiction writing, and all scholarship might as well cease.

While Dever has some valid points about the extremes of postmodernism, he walks right into the trap of supporting the postmodern contention that so-called “objective” scholarship is far from objective but is meant to support the status quo and the establishment. Furthermore, he ends up being the one who defends fiction against truth.

Biblical scholarship is largely a sham and should be mercilessly criticized, deconstructed or whatever, but with the objective of replacing it with proper scholarship. The opposite viewpoint ends up with giving prizes to the worthless rubbish that biblicists keep churning out—despite themselves, the epitome of postmodernism. It is all make-belief. Honest checking of the biblical stories against other criteria so far shows that biblical history is, to say the least, improbable. The “deconstruction” of biblical history presented in these essays is to stimulate the reconstruction of a better one, and that is initiated too. There is no doubt that it will be thoroughly disliked by Jews, Christians and Moslems alike because it shows that their religions began in a country they all hate, a country whose history has been ignored—Iran!

Others are not interested either in the trendy faddishness of postmodern subjective meanderings, or the aim of supporting present political set-ups, but are interested in truth, or the closest they can get to it, when much of the data are lost or deliberately destroyed. The Israelis have control of Palestine *de facto*. If they feel they need a myth to justify it, that is up to them, but their psycho-sociological need for it should have no bearing on any scientist trying to determine the true facts of history. If the leaning of the data we have is that ancient Israelite history is mythical then to defend the Israelis is no reason to deny it.

Dever does not like the criticisms of the traditionalists but they are quite justified. After one hundred years, Dever says we must still wait for some “mass of complex data” that will revolutionize the history of Israel. The critics of the truth of the Jewish scriptures as history are tired of hearing this, and are tired of hearing so-called archaeological experts lie through their eye teeth about what the archaeological record says.

The trouble is that most of these people have a vested interest in their belief, not in truth. When a few renegades suggest that a belief that depends upon lies should be questioned, they get enraged. It is not just Judaism or Christianity that they see as threatened but, as Dever says, the “Western cultural tradition”. It is a poor tradition that has to be upheld by lies, and it is a poor god that requires his believers to lie for him.

Wellhausenians

P R S Mooney says (*A Century of biblical Archaeology*) that, as early as 1890, “it was no longer possible to accept without question that the original religion and society of the peoples of ancient Israel had necessarily been different in kind from their neighbours”. Yet more than a full century later, not only are people who want to be ignorant taught it in churches, children who are supposed to be being educated are taught it in our schools. Is it right that Christians should oblige us to be taught what *is* not, or even what *might* not, be true? Julius Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena*, over ten years before that, had dated the *Pentateuch* and *Joshua* to the Persian period. Solomon Schechter, the discoverer in a Cairo geniza of the *Damascus Document*, called Wellhausen anti-Semitic. But the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, writing before 1851 when he published *Parerga and Paralipomena* had referred to...

...the **Zend-Avesta** from which **Judaism is known to have been derived**...

What Christians cannot fight they ignore, and they have been ignoring the truth about Judaism for 150 years at least. R J Coggins and J L Houlden can edit a book that purports to be a dictionary of biblical interpretation without even having an entry on Julius Wellhausen, rightly described by Joel Sweek as “the most important biblical critic since the Reformation”. Christians are aware that sins of omission are more effective—because less easily noticed—than sins of commission, though they use both to fool their ignorant flocks.

The first sign that the bible was not true history was when historians realized many laws in the *Pentateuch* could not have been those of a nomadic people. Wellhausen’s

documentary hypothesis was that priests of an already sedentary population must have written much of it, so that, even if the general history of Israel given in the bible were true, it could not have been true that the so-called books of Moses were actually written by Moses, the leader of a tribe of displaced wanderers. It was the search for an explanation of inappropriate laws supposedly used by nomads that began the critical study of the Jewish scriptures. It was a search for a more suitable dating of the books.

H G A Ewald thought the *Pentateuch* was written in the time of Solomon, hundreds of years after Moses had died. W M L de Wette then put *Deuteronomy* in Josiah's reign in the seventh century, hundreds of years later still. The priestly book, designated P, that included all the temple mumbo-jumbo then had to be placed after the exile, another hundred or more years later again. These abstract and onerous legal requirements, expanded by an even more extensive oral law, were still being applied at the time of Christ. It is time for another adjustment to Jewish religious history, to bring it into line with reality—the law was newly imposed by the Persians in the fifth century, barely four hundred years before Christ, and Moses was invented as its mythical founder, in deepest antiquity.

Nineteenth century archaeology might have been relatively amateurish and even incidentally destructive, but it was mainly non-sectarian and non-apologetic, and therefore honest. The archaeology that arose in the twentieth century under W F Albright and his school was much more destructive because it was sectarian and apologetic and so would not entertain contrary evidence. It was “biblical archaeology”. W G Dever wrote that W F Albright's “overarching goal was to undo the critical, liberal re-writing of Israel's history, ie, to rewrite Wellhausenism”, while J M Sasson said that “Albright never exerted himself to understand” Wellhausen, confirming that this highly cited Christian archaeologist was no professional at anything except being a Christian.

For over half a century, the gadding about Palestine of W F Albright and his school was counter-productive for many outside of America. European scholars saw it as ruled by a theological motivation and an apologetic purpose which was to defend the authenticity of the bible through its fundamental historicity. The contempt for archaeology the Albrightians generated led to its neglect and almost to its rejection by many European scholars. It shows that some students of the bible are interested in integrity and truth, but they are a rare breed among Christians.

Gosta Ahlström was a European scholar who became an American one through spending half his working life in the USA. He had no regard for the Albright school of mendacity. Biblical research could not be divorced from any other sort of historical research. Theological preconceptions and biases should be set aside along with any other bias not based on evidence, and nor were enquirers scholars unless they were willing to be led wherever the evidence led. He disdained those who played to their peers in the gallery to prove their academic purity without any commitment to historical fidelity. He said that they were not just wrong, they were immoral. Of course, most Christians say, “Not me!”

Ahlström did not want to accept an idea just because it was popular, but only when it had been satisfactorily demonstrated. Christian apologists remain fond of influencing young minds with expressions like “most scholars believe” but Ahlström would tell

his students that the weight of scholarly opinion counted for little, if they were all wrong! From the bible alone Ahlström by 1963 had decided that the perpetual monotheism of Yehouah was a myth. It was clear to him that the god had begun in a polytheistic setting.

It was also clear to Ahlström, according to Carl D Evans, a professor at the University of South Carolina, that he saw religion was an instrument of royal policy and administration in the ancient near east, a hugely important observation just because it defies orthodoxy, and explains so much. And yet in his posthumous history of ancient Palestine, he shows how hard it is for biblical scholars to purge their minds of the prejudices they were brought up with. The earlier chapters are commendably objective, but he later falls into the trap of accepting and paraphrasing uncritically the Deuteronomic history.

In 1921, Friedrich Delitzsch made out the Wellhausenian case afresh, refuting the empty apologetics that had filled books and journals since Wellhausen. Again it made no difference and churches continued to teach their myths as history. What is less forgivable is that newspaper writers and academics did the same. A recent case reported that medics had diagnosed Herod's mortal illness from his reported symptoms. It is a nice exercise for doctors, no doubt, and nothing wrong with that. Herod had to die of something whether the doctors are right in their diagnosis or not (autopsies show that 25% of diagnoses are wrong). But the reporter added to his report the so-called massacre of the innocents as if it were history! This reporter (Mark Henderson, UK *Daily Telegraph*) is a science reporter too! It is time that people of all walks of life stopped pandering to Christian mendacity, especially scientists and historians.

Even though the biblicists came to accept that the oldest date for the earliest parts of the bible to be written was the ninth century—as much as a millennium after Abraham—they claimed these stories had been passed down by a historically reliable oral tradition! Yet the evidence we have in any depth on oral transmission, from the middle ages, does not confirm that it is historically reliable. It might nevertheless be possible to argue that there is some reliable history in these traditions, but how is anyone to know what it is? Without independent confirmation it is impossible to know. What Christians mean, when they claim there is some historical truth in these ancient tales, is that they are essentially historically true, quite a different argument, but the one that they want Christian tyros to believe. They are essentially mythology, and any history in them cannot be decided upon, so they are useless as historical documents and should be discarded.

Biblicists, under pressure from genuine historical scholars sought to classify portions of the bible as secondary. Having done this, what was left was primary, and what was secondary was not authentic. What was primary was authentic. Naturally what was primary and authentic was declared historical and turned out to be the core history of Israel!

Delitzsch saw it as the propaganda that it was, and he too was often denounced as anti-Semitic for trying to distinguish truth from lies, and Christians even called him anti-Christian. Anyone who brings forward evidence that the Jewish and Christian bibles are mythical stands the risk of getting such treatment. Those who know nothing about truth and try their utmost to hide it will never hear truth as a defence.

To attack falsehood is to them to propagate hatred, yet they are often the people who hate, and not their critics. It is another right that religious people want to preserve for themselves while hiding behind a bland veil of love.

T R Glover shrewdly noted (*The Ancient World*, 1935) that no one could read the earlier parts of Jewish history with any conviction, and that it was a stranger history than any other in the East. He meant, of course, that it was too strange to be true because it was mythical, but even as late as the 1930s he was chary about saying so frankly. The history of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Egypt had been revealed by archaeology, but excavation unsettled Jewish history, and fresh discoveries made new uncertainties, difficult to explain. Could Abraham, Moses and David, long assumed to have been as historical as Winston Churchill, have been mythical? The evidence that had been found was that the names of some Israelite tribes were being used in Palestine before Joshua got there. Contrary to the Law, a Jewish temple operated at Yeb (Elephantine) in Egypt about the time when Cyrus let the Jews return to Palestine.

That Israel left Egypt as monotheistic as the Jews of modern Poland, and then relapsed again and again into paganism, is not likely.
T R Glover

Jewish history seems to have been written over and over again, but always left some clues to allow contradictory glimpses. The Philistine Goliath is killed by two different people. To say the hero had two names, or changed his name smacks of excuses. In other myths, the son of Aeneas had two names, and Romulus two, and Pallas Athene. In myths, they symbolize the merging of people, but in history they suggest the story is myth!

When one comes to ask why the Jews developed as they did, no satisfactory answer is given.
T R Glover

Jews have been scattered but have maintained their exclusiveness. They marry among themselves. They maintain ancient customs and ceremonies, taught them when Pericles led Athens.

It remains the historian's hardest task to explain why or how Israel came to the central belief in One God.
T R Glover

The "exiles" from Judah settled down in Babylonia, and, given the opportunity, many of their descendants never went back to Palestine. Some Jews instead moved East, and the Bagdadi Jews, the Bene Israel and certain other Jews of India may be their descendants. If the biblical thesis is right that the Jews wailed by the rivers of Babylon to go home, then why did many, perhaps most, do the opposite?

After the exile all Jewish life is modelled on the basis of a belief which astonished the rest of mankind.
T R Glover

It "was so abstract, so contrary to all tradition, so obviously unintelligible and unacceptable to every tribe and nation known". It has been obvious to many that something was odd and quite different about those who returned from the captivity.

Glover says that the whole character of the race seemed changed.

The false gods and village cults, stone pillars “under every green tree” (still familiar in Southern India), no longer attract the Jew. In psalm after psalm he speaks his contempt for them—“mouths have they, but they speak not”. T R Glover

“Israel went into captivity a nation and returned a church.” And, the ancient religion of the Jews survives, when all the religions of every ancient race of the pre-Christian world have disappeared, except for a few Zoroastrians (Parsis) in India and in Persia. How singular it is, and its explanation hidden in religious mysticism, but the existence of only these two religions links them, and suggest an explanation in real history. Glover does not entertain the myth that the Jews had been taught monotheism a thousand years previously, and E T Mullen (*Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations*, 1997) showed that *Deuteronomy* and the Deuteronomic history were composed in the Persian period, and the preceding books were composed to give *Deuteronomy* a context. Nehemiah brought the new religion, and Ezra, a Persian minister, inaugurated it. Nehemiah was a contemporary of Pericles, a man of the Persian court of Artaxerxes. He came from the Persian court to reconstruct Jerusalem 150 years after it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. It stands to reason that it is not a task for a private citizen. Every page of his account shows him battling with problems, external threats and apathy and treachery among the people of the land. He was intent on keeping the Jews from mixing with the local stock, people who were supposed to have been Jews themselves, but ones who were not deported to Babylon. It was an immense task possible only because it was Persian policy.

The Jewish people emerge very much what Nehemiah had wished to make them.

T R Glover

According to Z Zevit (*The Religions of the Ancient Israelites*), Sara Japhet posed a series of rhetorical questions in 1998 that refuted the thesis. If they were meant seriously, they are puerile examples of the prejudiced historian unable and unwilling to grasp a concept undermining their existing paradigm. The questions set up the Jewish scriptures as completely written more or less as they are now by the Persians about 500 BC. Needless to say, that is not the hypothesis proposed, so she is setting up her own straw man to knock over, and biased “scholars” support her in her trickery. The actual hypothesis is that the Persians gave their colonists a law, *Deuteronomy*, to take with them, and the duty to impose it and get it accepted. To do so, they provided an outline history based on Assyrian archives, but bent to the Deuteronomic theme of apostasy instigated by kings. What the questions ignore is that this was not a once-and-for-all event, but initiated a process that carried on into Hellenistic times. Her questions allow for no development of the scriptures during the Persian period, and no evolution of them in the next 300 years. Zevit cites one of the questions as:

If David and, in particular, Solomon were literally constructed models intended to promote Persian imperialism, why is it that they were presented as flawed characters whose idolatry and foreign wives led to the failure of empire?

If it was the Persians who introduced the myths of David and Solomon for the

purpose suggested, the post-Persian priesthood expanded the stories. The later Persian kings were idolaters and did have foreign—Babylonian—wives, and the empire then did, indeed, fall. So, the expanded story was an ironical reflexion on the Persians by those who eventually tried to hide altogether their Persian origins. “Scholars” postulating questions to which they ought to be supplying answers shows that they are biased or dishonest. The other questions she posed are just as puerile and dishonest, and have been answered on these pages, if she is really unable to think of answers herself.

Numbers 34:25 has in it Parnach, a non-Semitic, name. It is a rendering of Farnaka, a Persian name! Perhaps Sara Japhet can explain what a Persian was doing leading the tribe of Zebulun when the Israelites under Moses were preparing to enter the Promised Land. It was no glitch in reality, since the Persians sent the colonists into Yehud who became the Jews, but it was a glitch that an editor did not spot the name and change it to something more suitable for the myth.

Critical Dominance

An extreme but obvious lie that believers propagate is that they stand in a minority as the defenders of god and His truth in the world against the critical scholars, who plainly then are in a huge majority! B S Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament in Scripture*) says critical scholars are a “hegemony”. He means a dominating force. Albright thought he was standing against the massed disciples of Wellhausen, apparently a recently coined name for Satan. The clappies like to feel they are struggling like the victims of Nero against a cruel world, when the only cruelty they suffer is the indulgence of their parents and their overweening selves. These though are not sheep but pretend to be scholars. When scholarship is not concerned with truth it is not scholarship, and to claim God’s Truth, is to admit to being a liar.

The opposite of a “critical dominance” is the truth. The critics cannot get any broadcast time or print space to air their views and can only get published in academic tomes. Every newspaper has its devotional columns, extremely rarely given over to a non-Christian view and very rarely indeed any view critical of the Christian tub of hogwash. The internet is overwhelmed with Christian pap while having little that is critical. There has even been talk by the UK government, once run by a frustrated vicar, as the country’s foremost satirical journal knows, of extending the blasphemy laws. More than a hundred years of critical scholarship has penetrated to the minds of ministers to the extent that they must stop their parishioners from hearing about it, and if by accident they do, dismiss it as the work of cranks or devil worshippers. The whole of critical scholarship has not impinged in the least on the way that clerics address their congregations or the way they teach their Sunday schools. What is this if it is not dishonesty and contempt for discovery?

Views contrary to the believers’ are not argued against but are declaimed as contrary to faith:

Views like those of Noth attack the very heart and core of the biblical proclamation.

Reaction against such extreme criticism is the only possible approach for those

committed to the truth of the bible.

Opponents are extreme and are not even allowed to be sincere Christians committed to the truth of the bible. They are in error, and “error must be combatted!”. We know how Christians have combatted what they call “error” in the past. What do they propose to do today?

T L Thompson observes upon the circularity of the reasoning of the biblicists who “derive context from text” and interpret “that text in terms of its wholly dependent context”. This utterly unscientific nonsense is the lifeblood of biblical scholarship. G E Mendenhall writes that the apologists have destroyed any pretence that biblical studies is scientific:

If the ability to command general assent among those who are competent be the criterion of the scientific, it must now be admitted that a science of biblical studies does not exist.

The real point about scientists is that they must bow to the weight of realistic evidence. That is what committed Christians cannot do, and why they are unscientific. What is worse is that they pretend to be scientific for the sake of their sheep. Though they ignore the evidence countering the Christian myth, they effect a pseudo-scientific purity for the benefit of their converts. It can be nothing other than hypocrisy when Christianity brags that the central requirement of salvation is persistence of belief whatever evidence is brought against it.

Defenders of the scriptures are beginning to accept that they are not history and are seeking to present them as something less than historical, without actually admitting they are myths. Two recent editions of popular text books frequently accept the bible as less than historical. *Understanding the Old Testament (UOT)* and *Old Testament Survey*, according to Ron Vince in a review, defend the bible by denying its historicity. Repeatedly they say of a biblical passage that it “is not history as defined by modern historians”, or it “is not history in the modern sense”. History in the “modern sense” is “a purely objective practice”, or “a detached report of events”. The Exodus story, writes Anderson (*UOT*), “does not pretend to be objective history”.

The historicity of the bible is a religious premise. Expressions such as “Faith affirms that blah blah was superintended by the same Spirit of God that prompted blah blah”, are quite impossible to contradict without being insulting. To do so is to challenge the religious beliefs of the utterer, not to challenge any evidence. That is why these pages are quite uncompromising. Compromise leaves the pious Jews and Christians unchallenged and so continuing in the delusion that their position is unchallengeable.

Minimalism points to serious questions concerning the nature of the biblical text and its relationship to religious faith, such as what is meant by the truth of the bible. In what sense is it true when it is not historically true? Is the theological truth that God revealed himself in the bible dependent upon it being historical truth, or is a different method of expression truth? Are scholarly evidence and argument to be readily accepted when they support the historicity of the bible, but to be rejected when they point to it being allegorical or mythical? Christians have an obligation to use their mind because *Matthew (Mt 22:37)* has Jesus adding “mind” to the commandment to

love God with heart and soul (*Dt 13:3;30:6*). One assumes he did not mean “use your mind”, but “ignore whatever it discovers, and combat error in those who do not ignore it”!

Jerusalem

In the ninth century BC, Shalmaneser III of Assyria took tribute from the king of Israel, “Yeho, son of Omri”. In the second half of the eighth century BC, Tiglath-pileser III subjected most of the region, deposed Peqar, the king of Israel, and placed Hosea (Saviour) on the throne. Sargon II eventually annexed Israel and, following a well established imperial policy, transported the leading citizens. Some of the farms were abandoned for a while and reverted to brush but then the deportees were replaced by people from Elam, Syria and Arabia. The newcomers were absorbed, the economy recovered and the culture and practice of the state continued. Contrary to the bible, the whole of the population was not removed and the state destroyed, though it became a colony of Assyria.

The population of Lachish were not so fortunate in 701 BC. The Assyrians *did* murder and deport them all, but they did not destroy the city—the Babylonians and later the Persians did. In the next 50 years Jerusalem grew five-fold to a population of 25,000 people by about 650 BC. Conceivably a temple was built in this period of prosperity but there is no scientific evidence it was. All the evidence points to the first temple being the second temple! The idea that the temple was preceded by a first temple seems to be biblical mythology.

Jerusalem’s initial spell of prosperity did not last long. In 597 BC then in 586 BC it was attacked by the Babylonians. As in the previous cases, the Babylonians pursued the policy of transporting the leading lights and artisans of a population and Judah was left leaderless and impoverished. Jerusalem was not destroyed as Lachish had been but it fell into disrepair from neglect over the next 50 years.

Summarising, Thomas L Thompson writes that ‘in the historical developments of Palestine between 1250 and 586, all of the traditional answers given for the origins and development of “Israel” have had to be discarded:

- The patriarchs of *Genesis* were not historical.
- The assertion that “Israel” was already a people before entering Palestine whether in these stories or those of Joshua has no historical foundation.
- No massive military campaign of invading nomadic “Israelites” ever conquered Palestine.
- There was never an ethnically distinct “Canaanite” population whom “Israelites” displaced.
- There was no “period of the Judges” in history.
- No empire ever ruled a “united monarchy” from Jerusalem.
- No ethnically coherent “Israelite” nation ever existed at all.
- No political, ethnic or historical bond existed between the state that was called Israel or the “House of Omri” and the town of Jerusalem and the state of Judah.
- In history, neither Jerusalem nor Judah ever shared an identity with Israel before the rule of the Hasmonaeans in the Hellenistic period.

Babylonian Deportation

The population of Judah did not cease to exist in 586 BC and Jerusalem and its region were not entirely depopulated after the Babylonian army took the city. Those who may have been taken to Babylon in one of the many deportations from Palestine to Mesopotamia during the first millennium BC cannot be assumed to have been ethnically or religiously related to any of the several groups who identified with a self-understanding of Hezekiah's remnant Jerusalem, but as a *returning* remnant, with "exile" as their self-defining literary paradigm.

The unskilled population left behind struggled on in poverty again shepherding their flocks until the king of Persia, Cyrus, issued an edict that Jerusalem should be "restored" as a vassal state of the Persian Empire. The "Jews" were to be "restored" to their rightful kingdom and their god "restored" to his temple. Several attempts may have been tried to do this in longer than the succeeding century, but then bodies of people were sent to carry out the edict, and the poor people who had been left behind on their own hillsides for longer than they could remember wanted to participate in the wonderful project. Their pleas were ever rejected and they were villified by the newcomers who had "returned" from "exile" as Samaritans and Am ha Eretz.

The quizzical marks in the previous paragraph highlight a fact of the "exile" that scholars do not tell the punters. The Assyrians from about 850 BC had a policy of transporting the leading classes of a conquered country to some distant part of the empire. The idea was plain. The leaderless people remaining were not likely to cause trouble and the deported people would be too insecure and busy establishing themselves elsewhere to bother about revolution. Even minor kings had the same policy. Mesha of Moab, on the Moabite Stone, says he attacked the city of Ataroth, built by the King of Israel, and slaughtered "all of the people of the town to satisfy Chemosh... settling in the city the men of Sharon... and Maharith".

Even the Jewish scriptures admit it, and tell us of deportations unknown otherwise in history, if they are not excuses. In *Ezra* 4:2, the biblical author makes out that the natives of Judah, who want to help the Persian colonists to build the temple, were put there by Esarhaddon king of Assyria (680-669 BC). These people said, "we seek your God, as you", and that they used to worship him as new deportees in the days of Esarhaddon. So, they had been sent in by Esarhaddon and made to worship Yehouah! If this is true then it is an Assyrian deportation unconfirmed elsewhere. It is not the only one that this author reveals. He also mentions, in *Ezra* 4:10, "the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar exiled and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest of the province 'Beyond the River'". This king is Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) who received the submission of twenty-two kings of the west, and, having exiled captives from Kirbit to Egypt, he was obviously deporting people. Together, they seem to be excuses to ignore the Samaritans and the Am Ha Eretz as not genuine worshippers of Yehouah.

This much the scholars admit, but the real point is that the Assyrians presented the move to the people being deported as a salvation from their oppression by their rulers in the land in which they lived because they had previously been deported there! Not all the people being thus deported were fools but they were in a dodgy situation and the Assyrians softened the blow by giving them every assistance in their new colony

—land, status and the protection of the empire against the natives.

They were led genuinely to believe that they were being helped by their deporters and they were helped by being granted privileges as long as they did as the king decreed. It seemed this could only be if the story were true, and, of course, if they chose not to believe it, protection could be withdrawn and they could be left to be massacred by the native populations. It paid to co-operate! They were led to think of themselves as pioneers in what was supposedly their own land, restoring the forgotten traditions of their ancestors. Their wealth and power was gone but they were clever and skilled people who were able to make a success of rebuilding. Ultimately, the policy was meant to melt the divers populations of the empire together into a coherent amalgam.

Nabonidus, the Babylonian king, mistakenly called Nebuchadnezzar in the scriptures, followed this policy in restoring Harran. He assured a mixed group of people they were “returning from exile” to their rightful home in Harran and that they could set up and worship their own gods there. However, the true and original god of Harran was the god, Sin, the Lord of Heaven, and the empire would be sponsoring a grand temple to the original god restored to his rightful glory. Nabonidus presented himself as a restorer of gods and a saviour of peoples.

Needless to say, though some of the “returners” will have set up shrines to the gods they brought with them, before long the grand temple of the original god, Sin attracted all the customers and the shrines quickly closed. If this should sound familiar, so it should. Cyrus, Xerxes, Darius and Artaxerxes all published documents expressing the same policy as Nabonidus and declaring themselves as restorers of gods and saviours of people. It is precisely what Cyrus and his successors intended in Judah.

Cyrus the Persian

Cyrus allowed some people to return to the hill country of Judah and restore the rightful god of the land, Yehouah, but the cult of this god turned out not to be the one worshipped by the Samaritans, the native people of Israel. The scriptures mention this Persian king 19 times and tell us about his edicts no less than eight times (2 *Chr* 36:22,23; *Ezra* 1:1,2; 4:3; 5:13,17; 6:3,14; *Isa* 44:28). *Isaiah* (*Isa* 45:1) also declares that Cyrus was God’s anointed—the messiah or saviour of the Jews, and God’s shepherd.

It is unlikely if many, if any, of the the Jews who were returned from exile were previously natives of Judah or descendants of them, though later, when movement was freer, some may have been. The bible is clear that the people who “returned” wanted nothing to do with the people who had remained behind. Josephus (c 38-100 BC), the Roman-Jewish historian, writing in his apology for Judaism, *Contra Apionem* (1:13), could not be clearer:

Chaldaeans... since our original leaders and ancestors were derived from them, and they do mention us Jews in their records because of the kindred there is between us.

Here the Chaldaeans are the Babylonians and Josephus is plainly saying that Jews

descended from Babylonians and not Jewish exiles. Astonishing confirmation from a different direction comes from Mrs E S Drower who, in *Mandaeans*, tells us:

Both Jews and Chaldaeans are called Yahudai in Mandaean scripts, showing that they were considered one nation by the Mandaeans... Nebuchadnezzar is called a Yahudai.

However, Chaldaeans specifically means Babylonian Magi, and the colonists sent by the Persian king were probably Babylonian priests. Chaldaeans is the same word as Chasidim, which means “The Holy Men” in Hebrew, and were a well-known sect in Hasmonean Judah, and precursors of the Essenes!

The accounts of the “return” in *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* suggest a long period in which the task of restoration was unaccomplished. The narrative obscures that there were four separate “returns” under the four kings of Persia, Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes I and Artaxerxes II. *Ezra* 6:14, records edicts of Darius and Artaxerxes as if to illustrate that the policy was a continuing one of near eastern monarchs.

Assyrian records indicate deportations from Hazor and Galilee in 733, Samaritans were deported in 722 (*2 Kg* 17) and people from Hamath and Babylon were moved in. The king of Gaza and the citizens of Rapha were deported by Sargon to Assyria after the siege in 720 BC. People were deported from Jerusalem and Judah in 701. People were carried off by Babylonians from Jerusalem (*2 Kg*) in 597 BC and 586 BC. Persians deported people into Judah in 538 BC and on three subsequent occasions. Samaritans were deported to Alexandria under Alexander. Alexander also settled Macedonians in Sebaste. Ptolemy Soter (Saviour) of Egypt deported a great number of Jews to Egypt as soldiers in 320, and in 312 transported another large number to Cyrene and Libya. Seleucus did the same when he built Antioch. Ptolemy Philadelphus moved more Jews into Egypt and translated the Jewish scriptures into Greek. Antiochus the Great moved 2000 Jewish families from Babylon to Phrygia and Lydia where their Hellenized descendants were the basis of Paul’s mission.

The Samaritans apparently also experienced another “return” (*Ezek* 36; *Jer* 21). Yet another “return” is mentioned in the *Damascus Rule* where the Righteous Teacher and a remnant returned from exile. The final dispersion of the Jews—effectively the same programme of pacification continued now by the Romans—was the diasporas of 63 BC, 70 AD and 135 AD when the markets were said to be full of Jewish slaves who later became freedmen in various parts of the empire, their freedom often bought by already free Jews. The implication of the name of the Synagogue of the Libertines (*Acts* 6:9) is that it was for freed Jews.

Note that in the biblical accounts in *2 Kings*, “all” the people were carried off twice and yet some were left to escape later to Egypt. None of these dispersions and deportations were total, that is mere biblical hype. The northern state was said to have been totally carried off because the Jews who wrote the scriptures wanted an excuse for not liking their northern neighbours in Samaria who had an independent cult of Yehouah. So they pretended that Samaria was not Israel.

No deportation can be certainly linked to the same people or their descendants returning. It was the “return” of somebody officially sponsored by the Persian administration that created Judaism. There was a temple in Jerusalem by about

400 BC we know from a documentary source, a letter from Elephantine on the Nile to the High Priest in Jerusalem.

In each place that an old god was restored, he was restored with the title, “king of heaven”. The rulers wanted everyone to worship the same god and their idea was that eventually, everyone would worship a “king of heaven” with broadly the same characteristics and merely having different names. The Great King of the empire could then be shown to have the same role on earth as the universal king of heaven, and the various kings of heaven could be shown to be different versions of Ahuramazda, unifying everyone. The effects of this universal mixing of peoples was that:

- Aramaic became the language of the whole area.
- “Jews” accepted that they had “returned” but they never accepted the natives of the hill country as being Jews.
- The “Jews” that had “returned” used some Samaritan legends but rejected the rest of the cult and devised a new religious “tradition”.
- The people that had remained in Judah never accepted those who returned.
- The people who had remained in Judah did not accept the “restored” religion.

All that is initially, though later the two groups did blend, and will have been intended to. The historicity of the deportations is shown by the West Semitic names that appear in the city rolls of various Assyrian cities and military rolls at this time. But, though this mass movement of people under Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans was a continuous imperial policy, the bible never declares it as such and, rather the opposite, gives the impression it happened only to Jews.

The Persian name for the statelet that supported Jerusalem was Judah, but how significant a state was it? Herodotus wrote his famous histories in the middle of the fifth century, about the time that we think Nehemiah was sent as governor to Jerusalem but about thirty years before Ezra really imposed Persian policy. Herodotus notes the towns and peoples of the Levant but mentions no people called Jews or even Israelites! People of these names cannot have existed then or were insignificant. Admittedly, a whole section of the *Histories*, the part describing Assyria, has gone missing! It is the very part of the book that might be expected to mention the statelets of Judah and Israel and throw light on the formation of Judaism. Its disappearance suggests that Christians did not find in it what they wanted to read and suppressed it.

The Greeks

Alexander the Great defeated Darius and conquered the mighty empire of Persia, briefly creating the greatest empire the west had ever known. Alexander saw the sense of winning over the Jews, who had remained loyal to the Persians who had founded them and favoured them as a loyal outpost of the Persian belief in the universal God of Heaven, and therefore of the Almighty’s king of kings on earth, the Persian king. The Jews of the Jerusalem temple had yielded peacefully to Alexander who then worshipped before the Jewish God. Later, the Jews of Babylon surrendered immediately to the conqueror, and other Babylonian Jews submitted too. Shortly, Alexander had a Jewish contingent in his Babylonian army.

Alexander aimed at unification by promoting cultural assimilation and set up Greek cities, administered in the Greek way and operating Greek schools, religions, gymnasia and theatres. The Jews adopted the Greek way of doing most things and incorporated them in their sacred writings. In the Hellenistic period the Jews adopted the Greek habit of teaching in schools in which they imparted the skills taught in Greek schools, poetry, philosophy, reading and copying, and began the habit of commentating on texts. When they came to writing a history of themselves they used many of these Greek arts and also the Persian concept of linear history.

Alexander had no thoughts of changing the Persian and Assyrian policy of pacification and continued to deport people. Thompson describes Judaism as “Asiatic Hellenism”. Jews were central to the life of Alexander’s new empire and many of his cities like Alexandria, Antioch and Babylon had large Jewish populations whether by deportation or by voluntary mercantilism. The Samaritans, on the other hand, rebelled against the Greeks and Alexander massacred whole sections of the population. Other Samaritans he moved into his new city, Alexandria, in Egypt and replaced them with Macedonians from his own country, organized as a military colony at the heart of Palestine.

But Alexander’s empire split into two main divisions after his death, a northern, Seleucid, branch and a southern, Ptolemaic, branch. Palestine initially was under the Egyptian kings, the Ptolemies, but later the Syrian Greeks, the Seleucids, took over. Samaria (Israel) tended to look to the Seleucids and Judah toward the Ptolemies, accentuating the differences between the two statelets.

When Ptolemy seized Jerusalem against little opposition because it was the Sabbath day in 320 BC, he took many prisoners from Samaria as well as Judaea and settled them in Egypt. A few years later in 312 BC, Ptolemy was again campaigning in Palestine and razed several large towns to the ground, again forcing many people to emigrate to Egypt, a favourite place being the new city of Alexandria and another being Ptolemy’s Jewish colony in Cyrene. Besides the enforced moves of Jews to the new city, Ptolemy welcomed voluntary pioneers from Palestine. All of this movement from Palestine meant that, even as early as the reign of the first Ptolemy in Egypt, there were probably more Jews in Egypt than in Judaea.

The scriptural book of *Jeremiah* tells of a Jewish diaspora in Egypt (*Jer* 24:8; 26:22), and during the Persian period many Jews had settled in Egypt with the encouragement of the Persians, to act as military colonies. They did not therefore mix with the native population and preserved their Jewish character. The Egyptians resented the Jews as enemies or agents of their enemies the Persians but Josephus preferred to see it as envy:

The Egyptians were the first to cast reproach on us—when they saw us approved by many, they were moved with envy.

Against Apion

A large district in the region of Heliopolis (On) became exclusively Jewish, a fact reflected in the romance of *Joseph and Aseneth*. Another large Jewish colony existed at Memphis. Documents related to the imposition of the royal taxation, from Thebes proves that a surprisingly large number of the government’s taxation officials were Jewish. The city of Alexandria was divided into different quarters, with the Greeks in

the centre, the Egyptians in the west and the Jews to the north-east. So Judaism flourished in Alexandria, but it was of a peculiarly Hellenistic type.

Greek was the language of worship and the scriptures had to be translated into Greek, if the faithful were to be able to read them—they knew no Hebrew. Philo of Alexandria's explanation of the divine names proves that he did not understand Hebrew. When *Ecclesiasticus* was translated into Greek, the translator's preface proves that the Egyptian Jews used only the Greek bible. The considerable Greek additions to some of the, particularly later, books of the scriptures like *Job*, *Proverbs*, *Esther* and *Daniel* show that these Greek works had become partially independent of the Hebrew versions that were later taken by the Rabbis as canonical. The *Wisdom of Solomon* never had a Hebrew original, having been composed in Greek.

The Greek additions to *Esther* were written by a priest called Lysimachus in excellent classical Greek. He supposedly wrote originally in Jerusalem but sent his script to Alexandria in the hands of a Levite called Ptolemy! The story suggests much about the writing of the Jewish scriptures generally, not merely *Esther*. The scripts were sent to Alexandria for Ptolemy's library, and the latest additions were actually written in Greek. Cleopatra might have been taking manuscripts for her restoration of the library until near her death in 30 BC. In the first century BC, Simeon Ben Shetah altered the Jewish Ketubah or wedding contract to make divorce more difficult, basing his revision on a third century BC Ptolemaic model.

In Palestine, the century of Egyptian Greek rule was mild so long as the requisite tribute was paid. Indeed, the Jews were allowed to rule themselves, or rather be ruled by a Jew—the High Priest.

The northern Greek empire began under Seleucus Nicator (312-281 BC) who had his capital at Babylon. The western edge of his empire, abutting the Mediterranean at Antioch and stretching to the northern Euphrates, became known as Syria, a lazy pronunciation of Assyria. In 198 BC, the king of the northern Greeks, Antiochus the Great (223-187 BC), drove off the southern Greeks and took Phoenicia and Judaea. The Ptolemies were never to regain it, but again many Jews deserted Judah for Egypt. Antiochus settled Jews from Babylon into Lydia and Phrygia where three centuries later Christianity was to take root.

The Ptolemies were always preferred by the leading Jews in Jerusalem to the Seleucids even though the Seleucids granted Jews full civil rights in all of their great cities and foundations (Josephus *Antiquities* 12:3). But the Ptolemies plotted and intrigued with the Jews against their Syrian rivals—later with the connivance of the advancing Romans. Josephus in *Contra Apionem* makes no attempt to disguise his preference for the Ptolemies, and they did generally treat the Jews well, Jonathan Maccabee being honoured by them in *1 Maccabees* 10:57-60.

Hellenization in Judaea

Throughout the period from before 300 BC to the Maccabaeen revolt, the Jews were under the domination of the Greeks and the spread of Greek culture and institutions profoundly influenced the tiny theocracy. The theatre, schools and gymnasia were introduced. New political institutions like a senate (*gerusia*) presided over by the

High Priest but set up on Greek lines required a senate house. It was in this period that the Sanhedrin (Greek: *synhedrion*, a council) was created—about 190 BC, perhaps evolved from the senate, as a council of “rulers”. Greek social life required places to walk and talk and meditate, the *Stoas*, cool, cloister-like galleries for lounging and discussion (from which the word Stoic comes) and soon to be realized in the porticoes of Herod’s temple.

Whole areas were thoroughly Hellenized at this time. Not just Decapolis but apparently the whole of the east bank of the Jordan was Greek. Many cities on the west side, especially on the coast of the Mediterranean were entirely Greek in style and organization. Samaria and Pnias had been settled by Alexander’s Macedonians from the outset, and were thoroughly Graecized. *1 Maccabees* makes it quite explicit.

A new class of educated Jews spoke Greek and became the administrative and priestly class of “scribes”. “Scribe” in Hebrew is “Soferim” and properly means “bookmen” because they taught out of the *Book of the Law*, provided by Ezra—their tradition came down from the time of the Persian administrators. The law they taught was oral and not subject to exegesis, though they seem to have made their own modifications as needed. Apart from people interested specifically in religion like some priests, Pharisees, scribes and Essenes, the common people will have known no Hebrew. They spoke mainly Aramaic and some knew sufficient Greek to get by. Further east, the Babylonian Jews spoke a different dialect of Aramaic but no Greek.

Jerusalem and its immediate surrounding population of loyal Jews—since the edicts of Cyrus, those within a day’s march, say 25 miles of the temple—seemed an island among the Greek provinces. Polybius, at the beginning of the second century BC speaks of the Jews as “those who lie about the sanctuary called Jerusalem”. The city was little more than the temple and what was needed to service it, and later the Maccabees found Hebron, twenty miles south, a hostile Idumaeon town. the Nabataean Arabs pressing north from the south of the Dead Sea had pushed the Idumaeans before them, squeezing places the Jews liked to think of as their own. To the east, the Jewish sphere extended to the Jewish town of Jericho.

Abomination

The Seleucid ruler Antiochis III took over Jerusalem in about 200 BC, granting privileges to the Jews of the city. Since the Jews were privileged from Persian times, the new administration will perhaps have been restating traditional privileges, more than granting new ones, as priests and temple functionaries.

In 173 BC, a group of Jews called the Tobiads, who had apparently not been recognized as Jews by the founders of the religion under the Persian administrators, opposed the priesthood and the High Priest, Onias III, and invited Antiochus to depose him. Onias was probably murdered and his son Onias IV fled in 170 BC with a large body of Jews to set up an alternative temple at Leontopolis in Egypt that lasted until the Roman dispersion of the Jews in 73 AD. Its closure by the Romans shows that it was regarded as a legitimate Jewish temple! The Falashas, the Jews of Abyssinia, had the 24 books of the scriptures but knew nothing of the Talmud and did not observe the Feasts of Purim and Hanukkah, suggesting that they had split from mainstream Judaism before the victory of the Maccabees. Yet, their scriptures are

based on the *Septuagint*, so perhaps these Jews descended from those who were founded by Onias at Leontopolis.

In 175 BC, Antiochus IV Epiphanes was short of tribute money for his tribute to Rome, and accepted a proposal from an extremely wealthy Jew, a brother of Onias III called Jason, to buy the high priesthood. Jason was Hellenized and aimed to convert Jerusalem into a Greek polis with its standard institutions such as a gymnasium—effectively a Greek high school—theatre and so on. Jason was appointed and the ruling classes of Jerusalem took to wholesale Graecization. Antiochus visited the new polis, about 173 BC, and was greeted with an official torchlight procession, and the acclamation of large crowds. Soon after, Jason was soon succeeded by a rival, Menelaus, who made a bigger bid for the priesthood, bought the office for a large sum of money then raised it from the population via the temple making him unpopular. Mob violence broke out between the rival factions, and Antiochus had to suppress the Jason faction with bloodshed, and damage to the city and the temple. Antiochus had to build a fortress and man it with soldiers from Syria to keep order. It only created more tension.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes defeated the Ptolemies again in 170 as *1 Maccabees* 1:18-20 describes, and would have gained control of Egypt if the Romans had not given him the hard word and obliged him to withdraw. By the time he returned from Egypt, the dislike between the Jews and Antiochus was fully developed.

Jewish propaganda is that Antiochus enforced Hellenization, but many scholars find this unlikely or even incredible. The truth is that, frustrated in his ambitions, seeing Judaism as an obstinate and prejudiced nuisance, riven with internecine strife, and annoyed by the scheming of the Jews against his plans against Egypt, Antiochus decided with the priests to present the Jewish religion to a variety of Zeus worship. He supposedly robbed the temple of its treasures and reinstated Menelaus, who had been deposed. In addition, Antiochus banned circumcision, imposed Pagan rites and, most notably, he burnt the sacred scriptures! You might wonder then what we have before us in the bible.

He removed the two cherubs of the Ark from the Holy Place, where supposedly there were no images, and set up an image of Zeus Olympiakos in the heart of the temple on the table of burnt offerings—"the Abomination of Desolation". Since Olympiakos means "heaven," Zeus was simply the Greek version of the God of Heaven, a Greek Yehouah. It cannot have seemed such a big deal to anyone.

Hellenization was the policy of the already Hellenized priests, and many, if not most, of the population concurred. Some Jews, though, favoured the Ptolemies and the Romans, rather than the Seleucids and the defence of the established religion was a good reason to cause trouble for the northern Greeks. Mattathias and his five sons, claiming to be religious purists, rebelled.

Doubtless as many Hellenizing Jews welcomed the move as traditionalists, called the Hasidim or Pious Ones, who preferred the religion as it had come down to them from the Persians, not the Greek innovations, but the latter were outraged. This was in 168 BC. A civil war broke out in which the Maccabees led the rebellion against the Seleucid kings for 25 years. They were supported as terrorists in this enterprise by the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Romans, who used both to weaken the northern Greeks

before annexing them into the empire.

So, the outcome was the opposite of Antiochus's intentions, if they were to promote peace and Greek culture. The immediate fashion for Hellenization evaporated and a reaction set in. The traditionalists rebelled and the country was rent with civil war. Eventually, the temple was rededicated in 165 BC and then the Jews had independence for the first time in history when Simon Maccabaeus, last of the five brothers Maccabee, finally settled with the Seleucids after a quarter of a century of struggle.

Jewish Parties

With Simon the Just, the surname "Just" appears for the first time associated with the Tobiads. Later it seemed to be particularly Essene and this might be when the precursors of the Essenes, the Hasidim, first entered the stage too. As conservatives attached to the traditional Persian forms of Judaism, they would have opposed the modernisation of the Greeks, but since the ruling class hitherto had favoured the Ptolemies, Simon and his allies favoured their enemies, the Seleucids, who also had the advantage of being in touch with their spiritual home, Babylon. Later, the Hasids came to regard any alliance with the heathen world as an affront to Yehouah.

Perhaps, Simon was the last of the traditional priesthood following Persian ways. His successor Onias III was deposed, but had meanwhile compromised and, thereafter, the priesthood were Hellenized. The Hellenized priests, the Sadducees, could follow the old law insofar as it insisted on temple worship and was a religious law of Judaism, and they were glad to use the power of *Deuteronomy* 17:12 to allow themselves the right to change the law if needed, but otherwise they were happy to follow Greek civil law.

The Hasidim would have none of this. The law would stand as it is—the "law of the fathers". Only that law was of any consequence, but the later prophetic books were elaborated by parties like the Hasidim and the Essenes to protest, pseudepigraphically, against the modernisation of the Greek priesthood, and later their authors began to accept them as equal to the law. It seems the Sadducees were forced to concur that the law was fixed and they left administrative law then to the Pharisees. But they were unconcerned as long as they had the control of the temple. In Jerusalem that was the source of the wealth.

Later the Hasidim themselves split on the issue of the law. They realized that the law of Ezra was inadequate in changing circumstances and yet had decided that it alone had authority. They had to find a way of connecting everyday practical decisions to the law, and so used clever exegesis to extend it. The split was because the Pharisees began to develop an extensive oral law (that was nonetheless written down) to allow for modern circumstances, while the Essenes, though themselves using exegesis, refused to accept oral law and instead devised methods of their own. Pharisees became a body of lay teachers resisting Hellenization by exposition of Torah in public places. The ordinary Jew was indebted for his knowledge and justice to the Pharisees, while the Essenes looked to eschatology as the solution to all problems.

The Maccabees revolted against the Seleucids in 167 BC and eventually won

independence from the weakening Greeks in 142 BC. The books of the Maccabees present the victory as a just war against oppression but really it was the result of Roman provocation to weaken the Seleucids who they had already defeated in 190 BC. Rome's ally was Egypt to whom the southern Palestine hill people looked. The uprising is unlikely to have succeeded without external support, enfeebled though the Greeks were. So, cutting through the noble gloss put on it by the apocryphal books, the Maccabees were terrorists sponsored by the state's enemies.

The Hasmonaeans'—better known by their nickname, the Maccabees or Hammers—personal ambitions were veiled by their adoption of an apparent puritanism which gained the support of purist groups like the Hasidim. The pureness was for the Persian form of the religion rather than the Graecized form that was being introduced. Thus they took a strong view of idolatry, destroyed Pagan images, and evicted Pagan people, or forced them to convert and be circumcized to prove it. The people of Pella in the Transjordan were given the choice of circumcision or death. The reaction to all of this Hasmonaean “anti-Paganism” was the first recorded cases of “anti-Semitism” by non-Jews. Nor were the divisions in the country solved. In the late second century, under John Hyrcanus, the Sadducees were formed, and the Pharisees, who may have been traditionalists were forced into joining the militant opposition.

Pharisees were persecuted, exiled and eventually 800 were executed by crucifixion—a possible origin of a myth that became the Jesus myth. The crucifixion of the Pharisees was probably chosen as a Persian punishment because they were the purist faction that supported the Persian stamp of the religion. The opposition invited the Seleucid king Demetrius III to depose the Hasmonaeans, and a curious war ensued with Jews and Pagans on both sides.

On the death of Alexander Jannaeus, his wife, Salome, came round to supporting the Pharisees, and reinstated them. They soon were taking their revenge against the Sadducees. Another group, the Essenes, had been so disappointed by the Maccabees that they withdrew into the desert to avoid the impurities of the Jerusalem temple. Essenes and Pharisees seem likely to have been two varieties of the earlier puritans, the Hasidim. The reason for their disillusionment was that the Hasmonaeans, who claimed to be purists, actually were sponsored from abroad by Greeks and Romans and came to support Hellenization in practice, whether they began that way or not. If there was a difference, it was one of emphasis.

The earlier Hellenizers were happy to introduce Greek culture and practices, but the Hasmonaeans differed in wanting to introduce a Judaized variety of Hellenization, by keeping some characteristically Jewish features. Silver coins minted in Jerusalem for fifty years under the Ptolemies were not devoid of images, as the religion seemed to require. They carried pictures of Ptolemy I, his wife Berenice and an eagle. The Hasmonaeans also had no objection to having Pagan symbols on their coins, and only the last of them took to using the Jewish Menorah instead. The tombs of the priestly nobility were magnificently Greek in style, all except their lack of sculptured figures. This was apparently a puritanical fashion, or token, because figures, especially animals or legendary creatures, seemed not to have been proscribed so long as they were not God. The Jewish aversion to figures generally seemed to have been a puritanical fad of the civil war period of about 166-136 BC. The kings were not so fussy to judge by the coinage, but priests who seemed thoroughly acculturated to

Hellenism, adhered to certain aspects of the purer Persian Judaism.

The Hasmonaeans set up a Jewish free state for the first time in history. Only then were they able to write a Jewish history, a mythical, fanciful and bowdlerized history that today is the word of God. The Beth Midrash, the Jewish Academy, was based on Greek philosophical schools in their type and organization, although not in their content. The relationship of student and teacher were similar, and so were methods of exegesis. The Greek model was the only possible one for these schools.

The discoveries in the Dead Sea caves show that the Essenes, at least, were still strongly influenced by Persian religion into *New Testament* times. Lee I A Levine persistently calls manifestly Iranian influences at Qumran, Hellenistic ones, and innocently writes that explaining these influences on the Essenes is “a formidable challenge,” especially as the Essenes had deliberately hidden themselves from all influences by living in the wilderness. Levine finds it all astounding. That in itself is astounding! It is astounding how blind “scholars” can be when they think they have to see for God!

The Hasmonmaean state was a product of Hellenism. It was, in the end, a typical Hegelian synthesis of Iranian Judaism and Greek culture, which sidelined the puritans—the Essenes—until they found fresh life as a gentile religion in the Roman empire.

Jerusalem was small from the Persian period until the Hasmonaeans, but with independence, it expanded rapidly from about 5,000 people to about 30,000. The citizens were Jews who were priests and attended the temple as various types of functionaries. With independence, they also became rulers, politicians and emissaries to Sparta, Rome and elsewhere. Josephus mentions the priests Hezekiah as leader in the time of Ptolemy I, Onias I, a priest who dealt with diplomacy with Sparta, Onias II who was an emissary to the Ptolemaic Greek court in Alexandria. Ben Sirach says that Simon the Just was a High Priest, and the Jason who bought the priesthood from Antiochus made sweeping changes in the city as its ruler.

Jason of Cyrene wrote a five volume acclamation of Hasmonaean victories about 150 BC. This was epitomized about 120 BC as 2 Maccabees. This period will be when the bible as we know it now was rewritten. It was the Hasmonaeans who gave the temple its pre-eminent importance, and it was the Hasmonaean family who sanctified it in 164 BC. This is a good time for speculating that the romances of David and Solomon were elaborated as they now are, giving a distant grand history to the Jewish state and temple that the Maccabees were restoring. No synagogues as a communal place or place of prayer are known as early as this, even though it is barely second century. The duties of the people included giving the first fruit of any produce, and of the flocks, to the temple, attending in Jerusalem for the three principal feativals, making offerings to the temple for several types of sin, vows, childbirth and purely voluntary reasons, as well as tithes. The Hasmonaeans also instituted the duty of paying a half shekel to the temple.

The Yehudim

The Maccabees ruled for only a century from 165 BC to 63 BC, but for the first time in

Jewish history, the worshippers of Yehouah at Jerusalem had their own free state and Jewish propaganda made Jews self-conscious and hostile to non-Jews. Their main hatred was, however, reserved for the Samaritans, also Jews, but Jews who did not worship at Jerusalem but at their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The fact that the Samaritans were Israelites living in Israel was embarrassing. A myth was invented, or extended, to explain that Samaritans were not Jews, even though they worshipped the god of the Jews.

Jewishness was declared to be an ethnic description of a purely Semitic race rather than a religious description of a mixed race of people that have become more mixed still in the diaspora. It has fed many racist theories culminating in the absurd theories of the Nazis, but evidently cannot be abandoned by Zionists because it remains the basis of their own claims.

Who then are the “Yehudim”, the “Jews”? By the second century AD, when the rabbis had successfully salvaged what they could from the wreckage of the Jewish war and the insurrection of Bar Kosiba and had withdrawn from proselytising, the term applied to a religious group. Thompson warns:

The geographical spread of people referred to as Yehudim is so great, it would be rash to assume that this name applies to their place of origin.

The truth is that Yehudim meant a religious group from the outset—people who worship the god, Yehouah. The temple at Elephantine in Egypt, according to the letter already mentioned written in 407 BC, existed before the Persian period—before the “return” from exile and so before the so-called second temple of Jerusalem! The author writes on behalf of the “Yehudim,” there asking for help to rebuild their temple, a building of stone with bronze doors fitted with silver and gold, which had been pulled down by Egyptians annoyed that the Jews were sacrificing rams, an animal sacred to their god, Khnum. These people mixed and intermarried with the Egyptians, and so were not subject to the exclusivity taught by the Persian administrators, though they remained Yehudim as we can tell from their names. But the Jerusalem priesthood were certain that only they were the priests of Yehouah and it seems they ignored the letter. However the author had also sent the letter to the governor of Samaria. They were, apparently not writing as Jews to the capital of Judah but as Yehudim to the centres where Yehouah was worshipped besides Elephantine.

Could they in any case regard themselves as nationals of the statelet of Judah when their ancestors had been in Egypt for up to 200 years? And was the state of Judah sufficiently big to be thought of as a nation. This letter from Yehudim in Egypt denotes nationality as Aramaean, and it seems far more likely that by then the region as a whole would be considered as the home of Aramaeans. In private letters, people described as Yehudim are denoted as Aramaean.

The Yehudim of Egypt did not worship only Yehouah, confirming that they were not of the same religion as those who the Persians had “returned” to restore Yehouah to his rightful glory. Greetings sent on behalf of gods and goddesses(!) in the letter are from Ishambethel, Anathbethel, Sati, Bel, Nabu, Shamash, Nergal, and Khnub as well as Yehouah.

“Israel” as well as “Yehudim” is a name of the religious group of people that worship Yehouah. “Israelites” are those who worship Yehouah in the biblical narratives, though they are shown as a nation, but in the *Damascus Rule*, “Israel” denotes anyone who worships Yehouah, and, in fact, the Essenes narrowed it down to those who worshipped Yehouah in righteousness, meaning according to the law. The expression “All Israel” was used to cover those who were less than strict in their practices. So for Essenes, Israel was those who followed the way of perfect righteousness in worshipping Yehouah—they and no others were the children of Israel. When the *New Testament* speaks of children, these are the children it means, not babies still in nappies. Judah and Israel were therefore not nations but names for worshippers of Yehouah.

And the reason is simple. People of small tribes did not see themselves as members of nations but as followers of a god or members of a sect. It has been difficult for Christians reading the *New Testament* to figure out what was happening with Samaritans, Galileans, Pharisees, Sadducees, and such like, all wandering around freely. The point is that they were not ethnic or national groups but religious sects. They all worshipped Yehouah and therefore were all Yehudim, irrespective of their national or ethnic origins, but distinguished each other on the basis of sectarian differences.

The *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of Paul make it clear that Jews were happy to accept proselytes or converts of any nation as long as they met the criteria laid down by the law. So, there is no reason to think that a Galilean was someone from Galilee or a Samaritan someone from Samaria. In *Antiquities* (12:1:1), Josephus tells of a deportation of people from the highlands of Judaea and Samaria to Egypt. They squabbled about where they should send their contributions, to Mount Gerizim or the Jerusalem temple but Josephus happily calls them all Jews. Later he amends his position and calls them Samaritans, Phoenicians, Medes and Persians, though still admitting they considered themselves as Jews. Josephus says the Samaritans assisted people persecuted for breaking the food taboos but makes it clear that the accusation was unjustified, so here the Samaritans were guardians of Jewish justice not breakers of the law.

Many soldiers of Cleopatra’s armies and some of her main generals were Jewish but were accepted because they were Egyptians by nationality. Josephus speaks proudly of Jews as model citizens widely spread in the world. But he speaks of them as “those that worship God, even of Asia and Europe” making it plain that the distinguishing factor of the Jew is that they worship God, their God, Yehouah, who is the universal God of heaven! Philo of Alexandria makes the same distinction, calling himself a Greek by culture but a Jew by religion, in contrast to the godlessness of the Egyptians.

The Yehudim were neither the people of a small hilly state nor the worshippers of Yehouah specifically at the temple of Jerusalem but were simply worshippers of Yehouah. Samaritans and Essenes, not to mention the Egyptian Jews and many others who did not worship at the temple of Jerusalem, and indeed had a great lack of regard for its priesthood, were nonetheless Yehudim. It was the Maccabees who established a state, and thus were able to promote the idea of Yehudim as a national identity and an ethnic group.

The Scriptures

Whoever the mixture of peoples were that returned to the city of Jerusalem after 500 BC, they were led to believe—and came to believe—that they were the remnant of ancient Israel returning to their rightful land to create a new Israel. Despite their intentions and the Elephantine letter, there is no other sign of activity until the period of the Maccabees when the temple was dedicated in 164 BC.

Much of the *Old Testament* saga is Persian propaganda. The ancestor of the Jews is from Mesopotamia, so, in the myth of Abraham, the Jews are shown to have an ethnic affinity with that region. The anachronism of calling it the Chaldees betrays its late composition. Immediately, the descendants of Abraham are enslaved by the Egyptians and have to undergo countless tribulations before they escape and set up in Israel. The propaganda purpose is plain—to dissociate the inhabitants of the Palestinian hill country from Egypt and paint the Egyptians as their enemies.

Certain proof from much nearer to the time than we are now is furnished by Philo of Alexandria:

Originally the laws were written in the Chaldaean language...

Vita Moysis

The Chaldaean language was the language of Babylonia (*Ezra* 5:12) at the time of the project of Ezra to set up a new religion in Jerusalem. Why then would Moses, a Hebrew brought up in Egypt under some Pharaoh like Rameses, write in a language of a distant country 800 years later? Philo, an Egyptian Jew, effectively admits the Torah was written by Ezra, a Persian from Babylonia.

The Persians set up the temple to Yehouah and imported a new nobility of priests and Levites loyal to the Persian king to set up a buffer against Egypt. Though Egypt was in decline, it remained a rich and potentially dangerous country with a penchant for freedom from the Persians and an inclination to rebel and cause trouble in the south west of the empire. The Persians set up loyal outposts at such strategic points. Yehud was one of them and it explains the large amount of money spent on the small state and its grasping ruling class.

Though the imperial idea under the Persians and their predecessors had been to set up a universal god, they had introduced certain religious bans to assist the “returners” and this had remained associated with the Yehouah cult of Jerusalem. The Greeks had allowed greater genuine freedom of worship, expecting that the Greek way of life would naturally prevail as it threatened to do, as the Maccabees saw it. The privileged position of the Yehouah cult under the Persians was being undermined as Greek culture won people over.

Greek cities kept Greek municipal law and issued their own coinage. To legitimize these cities, a fashion arose of inventing spurious legends to tie them in with the Greek mainland and the mainstream of Greek history. The Jews of Jerusalem believed the Lacedemonians (Spartans) were fellow Jews and had an agreement with them (*1 Maccabees* 12:6-9; 20-23). G H Box comments in the *Clarendon Bible OTV*:

The danger of all this was that if this luxurious crop of legends was allowed to grow,

all recollections of the earlier history would disappear.

Box, unable to consider the *Old Testament* as anything other than true, thinks this threat was “warded off” but the evidence is growing thick that it was not “warded off” but was realized by the scribes of the Maccabees as the Jewish scriptures—the Christian *Old Testament*—re-assembled nominally from those burnt by Antiochus but really re-written to give spurious validity to the Jewish state, a novel entity created by the Maccabees.

With the rising of the Maccabees, the Persian universal Yehouah was usurped by the local princes of Judah scared of the success of Hellenization. The *Septuagint* version of the scriptures and many of the apocryphal works date from this period or even later. The biblical mood of Israel and Yehouah at war with ungodly nations is not a symptom of God’s timeless plan against wickedness but is the singular expression of the state of the world as seen from the throne of the successful Maccabaeen melchizedeks. For more than 200 years this god was a god of the Jewish nation in revolt.

In *1 Maccabees* 1:56-57, apostate Jews rend in pieces and burn any books of the law they find, and anyone possessing one is liable to be murdered by order of the Greek king. *2 Maccabees* implies that what survived of the documents of the law and of the library of Nehemiah were collected together again after the ravages of the wars with the Greeks. The books must have been scattered and fragmented and the passage (*2 Macc* 2:14) suggests it was Judas Maccabee who put them back together again as best he could. He collected the fragmentary remains of Jewish tradition and, at some stage later, they were worked up by adding fictional accounts based on the recent Maccabean campaigns into the Jewish Scriptures. The alignment of the dates of *Genesis* is based on the Hellenistic idea of a Great Year of 4000 years. Since the Great Year was timed to conclude in the year 164 BC when the Maccabees dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, it is plain that the books could not have been written earlier.

One scriptural book is plainly written at this time and that is the *Book of Daniel*, purporting to have been written in Babylon in the sixth century, it is clearly written about 165 BC and speaks of such as the “Abomination of Desolation” and the start of the rebellion of Judas Maccabee. The effort is damned with faint praise. So, the book is cool toward the rebels, led as they were by practical political men of doubtful piety despite their supposed motives. Yet, it displays an apocalyptic spirit that was to be an important inspiration in the next 300 years, leading to the various Jewish wars and the beginning of Christianity. It was the spirit of martyrdom.

There is more evidence from the time of Simon Maccabee that the Jewish scriptures were re-written after their destruction by Antiochus. The *Psalter* was compiled at this time and contains Maccabaeen psalms and many that have the clear stamp of Essenism. No clergyman can honestly think that the psalms were written by king David in about 1000 BC. King David is almost certain to be as historical as Frodo Baggins so cannot have written anything, but even supposing he indeed lived, few of his putative works will have survived until the *Psalter* was compiled toward the end of the second century BC.

In *Genesis* 15:12-16, the period of enslavement in Egypt is 4 generations but is 400 years showing that a Patriarchal generation was taken to be 100 years, accounting for

the ages of the Patriarchs. There are twelve one hundred year generations from the birth of Abraham to the first temple (1200 years). At the time of the Maccabees, however, a Jewish generation was 40 years, so there are also 12 forty year generations from the Exodus to the first temple and another 12 forty year generations from the first temple to the edict of Cyrus the Persian that ended the exile. Potty Christians will take all this to be proof of God's divine plan when it ought to be proof of human mythologising. The book of scriptures is shown to stem from the Hellenistic period because of the chronology in it.

This should have been clear from Justin Martyr. Justin enlightened us on the publication of the *Septuagint* He writes:

When Ptolemy king of Egypt formed a library, and endeavoured to collect the writings of all men, he sent to Herod, who was at that time king of the Jews, requesting that the books of the prophets be sent to him. And Herod the king did indeed send them, written, as they were, in the foresaid Hebrew language. And when their contents were found to be unintelligible to the Egyptians, he again sent and requested that men be commissioned to translate them into the Greek language.

Justin Martyr, *1 Apol* 31

Justin is saying that the *Septuagint* was written between 37 BC when Herod became king of Judaea and 30 BC when the Romans took formal rule of Egypt. Needless to say, this is 200 or more years after the date that biblicists want to accept, but it makes sense because Mark Antony had pledged to Cleopatra that he would repair the damage done to the Library of Alexandria during the wars of Caesar. Herod was a loyal supporter of Mark Antony and gained favour with Octavian by admitting it and promising to be no less loyal to the new emperor. Herod was therefore undoubtedly helping his friend. This then boasts of being when the *Septuagint* was translated, and the Jewish scriptures may not have been compiled much earlier.

This astoundingly means that the biblical scrolls found in the caves of the Judaeian desert and dated to the second century BC were among the original texts of the scriptures that were still in the process of compilation and re-writing. It accounts for the textual variation found in some books, for differences between the Masoretic texts and the *Septuagint*, and for the frequent agreement between the scrolls and the *Septuagint* against the Masoretic texts. It accounts for the absence of the *Book of Esther* from the scrolls and fragments because *Esther* is arguably the last book written of the Jewish scriptures.

The scriptures, then, were collected in the second century BC and compiled around 100 BC from the preserved fragments of old traditions—especially from Mesopotamian and Syrian myths from elements of old records, perhaps Assyrian, from tall stories like those of Herodotus, often called the first historian, and from sectarian propaganda like that found in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* and reflecting the religious exclusivity of the Maccabean revolt. The models for the stories of Saul, David and Solomon were the exploits of the Maccabees, and John Hyrcanus (135-105 BC) has been explicitly said to be a model for David. The stories are partial allegories in which the Philistines are the Syrian Greeks.

However, the original Persian aim of promoting Yehouah as a universal god still shines in some of the fragments of the scriptures obviously preserved from an earlier

time. Thus much of *Isaiah* and the wisdom literature matches up to the Persian ideal of a god which inspired Plato and the Greeks to develop their highly refined theories of a transcendental god based on the Persian cosmological concept of the sun beyond the sun—the sun of intellect, the god of transcendence.

The fragmentary nature of the scriptures is plain to anyone familiar with them but might not be to modern Christians who do not read their bibles. Many stories are repeated in doublets and triplets which do not agree. There are no less than five stories of the death of Saul in *1* and *2 Samuel* and *1 Chronicles*.

Samuel also anoints Saul twice. In *1 Samuel* 9:26-10:8 he anoints him as he leaves an unknown town. The two are alone, having met as Saul seeks the lost asses of Kish. In *1 Samuel* 10:17-27, he does it again in Mizpah, Samuel first making a divination from the assembled tribes and families while Saul hides among the baggage! In the first part, the question, “Is Saul among the Prophets?” enters the text awkwardly, and it appears again in *1 Samuel* 19 with a different explanation. The authors have sought to give an explanation of a well known saying, but have had two different versions and have included both.

The meeting of Saul and Samuel is described as a fictional account would, with God’s private instructions to Samuel reported by the omniscient author, and events that happened to them in private carefully related. In historical accounts, context is the main element and dialogue is illustrative. Here the account is in dialogue, like fiction. Conversation is central and the detail is psychological rather than physical. God even joins the discussion. These passages do not meet normal historical criteria. The author does not give a proper time and setting, as a history would have. They read as fiction and cannot be assumed to have any historical substance.

Saul seems to have been set a typical mythical task—to find the missing asses—and while accomplishing it finds his destiny. This is the stuff of myths. The asses are the ceremonial mounts of kings before horses were introduced and remained the same for poor kingdoms in mountains where horses were less sure footed. Thus the finding of the asses is the mythical symbol of being made the king.

Whoever compiled the books of the bible had different scraps of tradition. Not wanting to risk getting it wrong by choosing, they put them all in, in different places. There are few whole or original bible stories. They are collections of fragments of traditions—mythical stories, songs, and poems, sayings, official lists and administrative records. From these fragments the authors have put together a library of books intended to give a history and pride to a new nation.

The scriptures are full of the theme of wandering in the wilderness and then crossing into a new land. It reflects the feeling of the authors and their time that the people at last had a home after many years of wandering in barren places. Linked to it is the idea of exile—that the people have been exiled for too long but God had provided a place for them. Christians have taken these themes as real historical proof of God’s unfolding plan over the millennia, but rational minds will take them as proof that the scriptures are a late literary form intended to show that Israel was meant to find nationhood by coming out of their metaphorical wilderness, crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. The scriptures were written as Jewish mythology, to provide the people with an identity, a history, a cause, and a warning that it all could be lost

without vigilance.

The *Old Testament* story of Israel is one of the Chosen People failing to live up to God's expectations. It is a story, not of obeying God's will but of apostasy, the problem faced by the Maccabees. It is an extended version of the romance of Joseph and Aseneth, in which Aseneth is Israel shown as an apostate woman unsuitable as a bride for Joseph, a thinly disguised Yehouah. That romance ends happily but in the scriptures each wicked Israel is destroyed except for a "remnant," which goes on to become a "new Israel". It is this remnant that is the "children of Israel" not the Israelites in general. The children of Israel are therefore righteous Israelites, not all Israelites. In the romance Aseneth destroys her idols and returns to God while in the scriptures each righteous remnant tries to build up once more a righteous people.

It was the "re-dedication" of the temple that created the "new Israel"—in fact the only Israel that we are certain ever existed. The Samaritans of the Hellenistic period regarded themselves as the "new Israel" and the "children of Israel," and their few survivors still do. The Essenes and the Christians both also regarded themselves as the "new Israel". Each considered itself the surviving righteous remnant of the old Israel founding a reborn Israel.

The Practice of History

Those who look upon the past have survived it—they are its offspring and its victors. The western history of writing history draws upon the Hellenic and Jewish historiographic efforts of the fifth century. To find its real roots it should turn to the Zoroastrianism of the Persians and Medes which planted the seeds in Judah and Ionia. They never do. The Persians were not ultimately the victors.

The Jewish scriptures are considered the greatest history book ever, the record of God Himself acting in human history, and Herodotus is called the "Father of History" though his offspring were not fruitful for many centuries—only Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Sallust and Tacitus in the next 600 years, though the works of others were not liked by the Christian victors and were allowed to decay. Modern historians are superior simply because they benefit from better methods and much more experience, and so are better scholars, if not stylists, and the Jewish scriptures, if historians dared to pronounce on them rather than the clergymen and theologians that call themselves biblical scholars, would be found to be mainly mythology. It is said: "If all the biblical historians that ever lived in the world were laid end to end, they would not reach a historical conclusion." If they had, it would have destroyed their purpose in life and their sinecures. If the scriptures are history in any sense, it is primitive history and forged history. Creation myths and cosmogonies gave meaning to the past and lessons for the present in primitive societies, forgeries gave rights.

History is the surviving past. Yet, the past is over and done with and cannot be relived, only rebuilt from what it left behind. History is concerned with events, with changes that have occurred. It is rarely clear cut, and the present evidence of it is crucial. The greater problem of history is to establish what this is, to establish fact, rather than interpreting it. No historians think they know all or even most of what could be known, but they believe that, though events are receding into the past, they once happened in reality.

Historical facts are knowable only by the evidence they leave for subsequent ages. Not all of it is recoverable and the study of history is confined to that part of it that has left traces, or can be reconstructed by reason, to fill a hiatus. If something once happened, then it is responsible for still existing clues, and it can be hypothesized what they should be and where they should appear. So, evidence can sometimes be found when it was thought not to exist, and the historian can sometimes construct what was lost from what remains.

The historian cannot but work on the assumption that whatever happened is capable of a rational explanation and that evidence is the product of an act discoverable by reason.

G R Elton

Especially for ages where little has survived, the historian will have to depend not only on extant evidence but also on what is missing but must have existed, lacunae in the documents and missing books. Searching for the reasons for their disappearance can help fill gaps. Investigating who is behind a piece of legislation, it is natural to assume that the interests that benefitted by a law were those who demanded it. Admittedly people do not always know what their best interests are, but those that do rarely have any difficulty persuading those that do not. Educated people at least are generally rational and consciously act on the basis of reason much of the time, so inferences based on this assumption are often correct.

Properly conducted archaeology assists history by recovering evidence that can help to reconstruct an event that the archaeology itself is otherwise ignorant of. The site report of the archaeologist has to confine itself to the bare facts of the description of the site, and only by reference to known history or some historical hypothesis can more be said about the meaning of the findings. It can force historians to ask and seek the answers to new questions. Sociology, economics, anthropology and social psychology can also force new questions of historians, to do with class structure, the origins and meaning of social myths and rules. Mythology is unlikely to tell the archaeologists anything reliable.

The historian's main uncertainty is in ignorance and this is better confessed, because thereby there is hope that evidence will emerge, but when certainty is declared, the supposed knowledge is cast in bronze and no progress is possible without a sledgehammer.

Often, there is too much evidence in the sense that the historian cannot deal with it all and has to select from it. This is a source of criticism from would be philosophers, but in practice the arbitrary choice is that of the subject area to be explored. Thereafter, the material is the master of the historian, if honesty is the criterion. If not, the subject is mythology, not history. Mythologists are pseudo-historians. They set out, say, to prove that the Irish were really ancient Egyptians. They will succeed to their own satisfaction because they are interested in creating a myth, and will not admit anything to the contrary. Honest scholars, given the same puzzle, would soon begin to find so many impossibilities in the hypothesis that they would find themselves being led by the evidence in some different direction. That is the sense in which the evidence is the master of the historian. If history is not a search for truth, it is not history.

Viewpoint or Prejudice

Lack of knowledge and the need to select are problems but they are faced up to through proper research standards, scholarship and intellectual honesty. At the end of the search, only one thing is sure, that there is more to be said, and it will be said. Historians ultimately are democrats who enjoy debating in public, and history progresses by the refining of apparently settled questions through exposure to new evidence directly or indirectly. Knowing what other historians have written is essential to do the job. As in any study, there is no point in doing what has been covered to exhaustion or repeating an error, and other scholars will point to sources that they have found useful, problems that they have considered and solutions that might suggest solutions to you. The analytical work of other scholars need not be taken on trust until it has been checked at least in sample, but sometimes it is necessary, especially in peripheral subjects. Further, while studying the history of the last millennium might mean the available material is too extensive to comprehend, earlier periods can allow a diligent scholar to get a grip on most of the available material. In history, as in any scholarly endeavour, reading is the main way of admitting knowledge—and books are not likely to be supplanted by the internet, even for intellectuals.

“History” has a habit of passing people by, leaving them uncomprehending. Only later, when the historian examines the period can judgements be made about causes that were invisible at the time. Historians, like other people, judge their world from their own experiences and habits, and can therefore be biased. Yet to be universally sympathetic means that judgement is wavered and history becomes bland and of little meaning for anyone. Tepid history will have tepid approval, but that is no valid reason why any historian should suppress a view they hold. Refusal to judge looks like cowardice, but judging based on erroneous criteria deserves criticism. It is through such criticism that history in the end can claim to be objective. Intellectual honesty is to be preferred to a mawkish objectivity.

The materials of history are partial and the judgements of historians are more partial, so history always gives rise to dispute and hostility. The second historian in western history, Thucydides attacked the methods and purpose of the first, Herodotus. Historians are inclined to brutality of expression, and so the debate might look brutal to the onlooker, but it is no more so than were the discourses of medieval theologians.

Every generation rewrites history from its own point of view, and every historian worth reading will be expressing a viewpoint. History from a viewpoint is more interesting history than the tepid variety, and so more likely to be read. If history is not read, it might as well not have been written. So, those who read it must reach their own conclusions from reading different viewpoints. Historians are probably no more prejudiced, blind or wilful than anyone else, but, in as much as they are, their work can justifiably be criticized. Once they are published in journals or books, these products of preoccupation and bias are the common property of all. Those that see prejudice in them can expose it, and can write an alternative history giving another view. Others can look on in concern or amusement or can join in the fun, if they wish. Often alleged bias amounts to criticisms that assail irrelevancies or straw dolls pulled out of the minutiae of the endeavour. A serious attempt to right the supposed wrongs

can however progress understanding of the period in question.

A variety of opinion in historical debate reflects the process of historical discovery. The debate is based on evidence that was left by a real event and will converge on it provided that scholars treat the evidence honestly. History is not arbitrary, as some modern intellectuals seem to think, as long as reason remains a criterion of scholarship. There might indeed be several different ways of interpreting a body of historical evidence, but we are not free to take any that we like. If the first of the possibilities is considered unsatisfactory, the critic must explain why some other is preferable. If the critics' arguments have not been given sufficient weight beforehand, then the whole of the evidence was not in, because the emphases were wrong. If the emphasis is correct, or there are reasons why the critic is overstating the case, then the first explanation must stand.

What can do nothing of value, and could be dangerous, is to sneer that all history is biased, and pretend that fiction or mythology is just as good. It might be better, especially for right wing groups in society, but that is not considered by liberal critics who think they are *avant garde*. Historical writing can have an effect, so there is a tension between the search for historical truth and the effect it might have. But there is also an effect when truth is suppressed or distorted as propaganda. This too ought to be considered by critics of historians. As long as the debate is on, and the issues are alive, the prejudices of historians, inadvertent or intentional, froth up, are easily seen and skimmed to one side. What endures is what rises above prejudice and becomes a step towards what is sought—historical truth—and the bias of a historian might have been the reason it emerged at all. The background and personality of the historian cannot be bypassed. Politically biased work will rarely stand up, but alternative viewpoints in history can only be stimulating, providing that good standards of scholarship are kept up.

Could this have been?

Sometimes “history” is only the presuppositions of those attached to some doctrine or theory, and the honest application of some new approach can help to reveal this false history. Religious history regrettably seems immune to any such breakthrough. The doctors of biblical history reject any analysis not based on the fundamental assumptions of their doctrine. Those holding to such views cannot see, or refuse to, that the rejection on reasoned grounds of their interpretation cannot honestly be answered without producing any new arguments or proof, merely by asserting the original again, even more vigorously. For the biblical historian, it is true because it is decreed, they believe, by God!

Others of the same or similar ilk hide behind “the social responsibility of the historian” being “the defence of ‘values’.” This was the expressed view of the American businessman turned historian, Mr Conyers Read who declared that the historian must “accept and endorse” the social controls that “preserve our way of life.” Read was concerned that, unless history was properly controlled, people would seek “more positive” assurance from Rome or Moscow. He wants the historian to join his plot to write mythology, not history—and this is in the modern world! Admittedly people like Stalin and Hitler at opposite poles of the political spectrum have tried writing modern mythology instead of history and perhaps some countries still do it,

but they all take their lessons from Christian bishops and from the propagandists who wrote the Jewish scriptures before Christianity.

Read cannot want anyone to know “history” but only some “Big Brother” form of mythology to placate the people. He is no better than Stalin or the Popes—but historians must insist on the truth. Conyers Read should have given up business to become a theologian, not a historian. The historian’s job should never again be reduced to the role of a preacher. The preacher can rest his case on faith but historians should not, but must even question their own beliefs. The task of history is to understand the past. The task of mythology is to control the present. To be properly understood and not metamorphosed into mythology, the past must be respected in its own right. Use of history in the present for theological, political and propaganda purposes must be suspect, and considered dangerous to freedom.

The honest historian must abandon the present except to the extent that it reveals and illuminates the past. Study of history is an intellectual pursuit, the work of a reasoning mind. It must concentrate on the search for truth. These determinedly non-historians assert that, since the past is dead and irrecoverable, and that the historian’s interpretation of historical evidence is subjective, historical truth cannot be found. They seem to think that if we cannot know the whole truth then we might as well know none of it, or anything that they care to tell us. History to these critics is a matter of pure belief or even faith. It becomes the same as biblical history.

The historian’s aim is to seek the truth even if it is no longer entirely knowable, just as the natural scientist aims to understand nature as best as it is possible to do, even if it is ultimately impossible to know it all. Both recognize the problem of certainty and work on the principle of the civil courts that our approximation to the truth is built on the balance of probability. Like a court, the just outcome is based on asking the right questions and accepting the proper standards of probability. This automatically takes account of the Principle of Parsimony (Occam’s Razor) which, is that the simplest explanation, where there are more than one, is the probable one. The answers to historical questions must be probable! They must agree with what is known to be possible in human experience. At the end of a study, when scholars have worked out their reconstruction of history, they must ask: “Could this have been?” If it could not then they must abandon their scheme and reconsider the evidence. Christianity pretends to be historical, but on the best criteria of historical scholarship it is not!

History treats the transformation of things, and the historian’s concern is to understand change. History seeks the causes of effects, but has to recognize that the cause has to be shown, not merely assumed. Facts and events are not unique, even if individual and particular, but must be like other things of their kind though never identical with them, part of common experience, before they can mean anything in general. Anything truly unique is a freak that can never recur in meaning or implication and can never be assessed.

Forged Documents

In historic times, there is the problem of knowing whether evidence, notably manuscript evidence, is genuine or not. The historian has to establish its genuineness

and assess its significance. Historians ought to be able to distinguish a modern fake from a genuine article, but even notable scholars have been taken in in recent decades. It is much harder in the case of ancient forgeries and only utterly naïve people will deny that there are plenty of them, especially religious fakes. The *Donation of Constantine* was not exposed until Lorenzo Valla in the fifteenth century, but the papal officials had known all along, or at least for 500 years.

The historian must be trained to be skeptical and critical—everyone should—yet in the case of biblical history, the scholars make a study of what they know to be fakes that they take at face value, trusting to the honesty of a supposed holy spirit. These are not scholars and not historians. The truth can be obtained from fraudulent documents, especially when they are extensive, because it is impossible to maintain proper consistency over many pages of fake documentation. It does not need saying that the holy books of Christian and Jewish scripture are utterly inconsistent, but the scholars of these ancient forgeries spend more time finding ingenious ways of harmonizing them rather than exposing them.

Forgeries, or pseudepigraphs as biblical historians call them, are usually produced, like all fraud, to fool people then alive for the benefit of others, not to fool future historians. However, when a forgery is so successful that it is accepted at the time and becomes a part of history, like the *Donation of Constantine*, it might be difficult to expose. Many people will have a vested interest in refusing to accept the forgery for what it is. Entitlements are the main forgeries made and the many medieval charters are prime examples. V H Galbraith said “forgery was the medieval monk’s pécadillo.” The purpose was to establish legal rights. That is exactly what the books of the *Old Testament* are intended to do. They establish the rights of the colonists sent by the Persians to rule the small country called Yehud. Around these original books, meant to buttress these rights, grew a whole spurious history of Israel and Judah. Biblical historians cannot expose such a fraud because they are not skeptics but believers.

Geoffrey Elton, a professor of Tudor history at Cambridge in *The Practice of History*, says there are no historians used to examining old documents that have not wondered about the genuineness of some document sometime. He advises that, if there is internal or external evidence of forgery, it should be declared as such and only used as a forgery (in short, to show the opposite, or almost so, of what it claims). No one surely could take propagandist literature at face value. If there is doubt that it is genuine but no clear evidence one way or the other, then Elton says it should not be used at all! The doubt utterly invalidates it.

Assumptions of Biblical History

Biblical history is based on two assumptions that no one has ever doubted until recently.

1. The scriptures describe a real historical society.
2. The literature that constitute the scriptures was the product of that society.

Both assumptions are largely false. The scriptural accounts of Israelite history are essentially fictional. Its authors were not Israelites and were not contemporaneous, as the bible often makes out. Philip Davies says:

There can be no serious claim that the biblical texts as we have them derive from the Iron Age.

Non-biblical sources admit to a kingdom of Israel and another kingdom of Judah, but do not suggest any connexion between them, and references supposed to be to Judah cannot certainly be distinguished from references to the Aramaean kingdom of Yaudi. What seems historically secure is that a small country called Israel existed in the hill country of Palestine from about 900 to 700 BC. The authors of the scriptures were initially the Persian rulers of the country in the fifth century, then the Greek rulers and Judaeo-Hellenistic dynasties later on.

Critical reading, like all good enquiry, begins with skepticism, so a text has to persuade the reader who, as a critic, will be checking it for accuracy against other available sources of information. When the text agrees with other sources, it will be believed. Novels, short stories, plays, poetry or other similar literary forms have no need to be so examined because they are making no pretense at truth. We accept that their world is imaginary. The scriptures however claim to be historical, and so invite us to criticize them. They claim to be describing the historical intervention of a supernatural being in the world. If they fail to stand up to criticism we cannot believe that the events described in them are either true or supernatural.

As to the authorship, the standard interpretation of the bible makes out that the authors are “Israel” as though the whole mass of people called Israel wrote the books of scriptures—under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, naturally. Plainly the whole people were not responsible. Even if the authors were from Israel, they could only have been some literate class of people because the mass of the people in the greater part of the period covered by the bible were illiterate. So, the authors are not representative of the whole of society at all, contrary to biblical commentators. Moreover, the authors were not necessarily, or even likely, to have been members of the society described in these books. They were foreign rulers writing these accounts of the supposed history of a subject people to shame them before God to behave in ways acceptable to the God’s choice of king—the Shahanshah.

History for the Besotted

History is an attempt to show how we got to the present. Modern historians have a lot of past historical material to use as well as highly developed scientific and archaeological skills. Ancient historians had little of this. Some might have had royal or imperial archives or expenditures, but otherwise they depended on stories. They put together sagas based on what they knew, together with what seemed desirable to suit the situation of their own time. Historical works can say as much about the aspirations of the historian’s time as the history he is discussing. This is what happened in Israel when people came to write its history, now called the Jewish scriptures. They compiled a fictional history based on re-written old stories combined with fictional inserts to paint out blanks and suit the aspirations of the time—the time when the Maccabees had just dedicated a temple to Yehouah and set up a Jewish state for the first time in history.

Palestine is almost devoid of pre-Hellenistic texts. No international power developed

there, it remaining divided into local tribes except when united under a foreign conqueror. It never developed culture—art, architecture or literature—until eventually the Maccabees asserted their independence in the second century BC. Everything found before then is essentially Egyptian, Mesopotamian or Phoenician and even after then is mainly Greek or Roman.

Israel is a product of the Persian and the Hellenistic periods. The people deposited into the hill country around Jerusalem in the population displacement known as the “return” arranged by Cyrus, the Persian king, were encouraged to build a temple to “restore” their god, Yehouah, to his rightful glory. Persian experts put together books of law and some legends were invented to justify them.

A few centuries later an independent state did briefly emerge, by which time the people had a national “history” to glorify the new state and its uncompromising god. The ancient books had been partly destroyed in the freedom battle but from fragments the Hasmonaeans scholars reconstructed what they could and invented the rest. The rebirth of Israel was not a rebirth but a birth because there had never been an independent state before, so the history was a pious forgery and the glory of David and Solomon pure romances to give the people something to live up to.

Biblical experts are usually drunk and cannot be taken too seriously. They are drunk with their preconceptions of the power of God and his Holy Spirit. Were it not for their insobriety, we would today know a lot more about the bible and Near Eastern history than we do. W F Albright was for half a century a famous authority on the bible and biblical archaeology, but he spent his entire professional career totally besotted, so today it requires a scholar to distinguish honest facts from Albright’s drunken wanderings. The books he has written about biblical history are worthless except for amusement. He is often quoted as having written:

There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of
Old Testament tradition. ***Archaeology and Religions of Israel***

Yet even when this was written in 1956, it was not true. Almost half a century later, no such claim can be made on any excuse. Albright was able to see in the Balaam Oracles of *Numbers* 23f features that reminded him of the Ras Shamra tablets of northern Canaan in Syria. He drunkenly concluded that the Balaam Oracles were written by a twelfth century BC north Syrian fortune teller! Who knows? Perhaps he was right but his scholarship, if this was the extent of it, was pathetic.

Drunken Christian apologists are certain that, though people could write before the crucifixion, they were all fools. No one had the wit, for example, to write in a deliberately archaic or arcane style to give their screed an illusion of antiquity. Yet these same “scholars” will concede that Luke or the editor of Luke-Acts could do this literary trick and did—but they were Christians guided by the Holy Spirit and so were clever, unlike the moronic Pagans or even Jews who went before. Of course, human mental abilities have not changed noticeably in 35,000 years as any zoologist and anthropologist will confirm, but to the besotted no one was clever until they had God’s revelation.

Once this pious nonsense is ignored, it is possible to see that the Hellenistic authors of the *Old Testament* were quite capable of inventing and emulating old fashioned

styles of writing, when it suited them. Otherwise the remarkable thing about the Jewish scriptures is a uniformity of language, proving that they were composed over not much more than a century.

Most English speakers today find Chaucer unreadable, but he died only 600 years ago. Hebrew was supposed to have been a vernacular language double this time from Moses until Jesus and should therefore have looked quite different from the beginning of the period to the end. Hebrew linguistic history, like so much else of the ancient Hebrews, is unknown and John Joseph Owen says there “has not been a continuous use of Hebrew.” The language is not even called Hebrew until the time of the Greeks and it is not called Hebrew in the scriptures themselves.

Differences there are in biblical Hebrew but they are as likely to be varieties of dialect as chronological changes. In fact, Hebrew is some local dialects of Canaanite adopted by the Persian “returners” as a religious language in the fifth century and spoken thenceforth by priests, Levites and pious Jews, just as Jews today have artificially adopted an invented language—modern Hebrew.

Certainly, the myths and extracts of Jewish history that are recorded in the scriptures when they were written down about 100 BC included much older songs, hymns, poems, fragments of old folk tales and so on, as well as the legacy of the Persian period. But rather more than an apparent antiquity is needed to be sure that something is a genuinely old fragment.

Hymns and songs in particular might be genuinely old, because they are in a memorable and orally transmittable form, but unless the same hymn or psalm is found elsewhere to confirm its age, stylistic quirks are unlikely to be sufficient to judge. Christian writers of hymns rarely fail to use sixteenth century English words like “hath,” “thy” and “saith” to give their work the necessary gravity and biblical flavour. The editors of the Hebrew scriptures were quite capable of doing the same. Drop of the holy water, Father?

Cyrus H Gordon, in an article in the fifties on Homer and the bible and in a later book, saw a common background in the Greek and Hebrew writings. For example, *1 Samuel* 5-6 describes a plague which closely follows a description of a plague in the *Iliad*, book 1. The two are most unlikely to be independent. That was controversial if thought to go back to 800 BC but is quite understandable if the Jewish scriptures are late enough to have drawn on the Hellenistic culture that pervaded the world from 300 BC.

Is the Bible based on a Historic Kernel?

A historic kernel can just mean a historical setting and can therefore be nothing more than period detail. Any competent writer setting up a romance in some historical period will set it in whatever context he has. If he has no historic context, perhaps he will use some other context as the best he has, perhaps even the contemporary period he lived in.

The Persian province Abarnahara is mentioned by name several times in the Jewish scriptures but it is always translated to mean “beyond the river.” The river was the Euphrates and has been considered a notable boundary since ancient times. People

on either side referred to the other side as Abarnahara (or Eber-nari in Assyrian). The likely start of the word Hebrew is from the Persian name for the people who lived in their province of Beyond the River. They were the Hebrews—all the people of the province not just Jews. The Hebrew language is Phoenician i.e. Canaanite. What is causing confusion is that people from the far side (Assyrian) of the Euphrates were also called Hebrews by earlier people in Canaan, so Assyrian or Aryan refugees or raiders will have been Habiru, and they might also have been Arab raiders from Beyond the Jordan (perhaps with runaways, refugees and outlaws) for all we know. So the real kernel of the word Hebrew in its present use is more recent in reality than Habiru.

That it was associated with the earlier use might be right though—deliberately by the mythologists. The Egyptians had control of Canaan until the ninth century when Omri set up a kingdom in Israel. If the Habiru were Assyrian raiders, they eventually became the Assyrian conquerors as the Assyrian kingdom built itself into an empire. So, the short-lived kingdom of Israel died when the Assyrians colonized it, whereas a couple of centuries earlier Assyrians might have been the Habiru helping to get Israel's independence from Egypt. The native Canaanites were slaves of Egypt but they were not *in* the land of Egypt (most of them), but in their own country as an Egyptian colony.

If the Habiru were some sort of social class, they were associated with robber barons who apparently sought assistance from Beyond the River and fought the colonists. It was rather like the Maccabees later fighting the Seleucids, and the Maccabees will have seen this and expanded on the legends of David (a mythicized founder of Yehud—a different legend of foundation from that of Judah) and Solomon as they existed in what was probably an attenuated form, originally. The extension of the parallel is that the Assyrians were doubtless using the Canaanite guerillas against the Egyptians just as the Romans used the Maccabees to weaken the Greeks. So, they might have seen themselves as freedom fighters, but really they were being duped like the Maccabees, and the outcome was the same. The feeble kingdom finished up a colony of the manipulative power. The Persian “novelists” will have had sight of the Amarna letters or similar letters in the archives and could have associated their own name for the people of the satrapy with the historical name for these guerillas, but this too must have been an attenuated tale expanded later into a saga by the Egyptian Greeks.

The Hyksos have nothing to do with the Exodus. That they had is probably invented by Josephus trying to rationalize Jewish history, or one of his sources. The expulsion was a metaphorical one—Egypt was really expelled from Canaan. The promised land was an invention based on the “return” from “exile.” The promise of land was made by the Persians to the colonists, and was then written back into deepist history to give them a spurious entitlement. The Moses saga was mainly written in the time of the Ptolemies who supported the Jewish temple, and printed the original Septuagint.

Joshua's conquest did not refer to the original Habiru at all. It was a romanticized allegory of the colonial conquest of Yehud, drawing upon Assyrian military tactics, but the tribal districts would have been taxation districts being given a spurious factuality in history. So, the tribes of Israel began as Persian taxation areas.

If we want to talk about kernels then the kernel of the word Hebrew is the mythical

ancestor Eber (Eber-niri). The geneology can be nothing other than fictitious but is likely to show relationships between peoples rather than individuals, as is common in *Genesis*. They were not misguided. It was common Hellenistic practice and most of the genealogies will have been added to the bible in Hellenistic times.

The whole story did not fall together by chance but was deliberately concocted by the Persians using the Assyrian sources they had, and later was elaborated in Greek and Maccabean times. The final additions might have been made as late as the Herodian period.

Biblical history is not true history but a set of stories about righteous people struggling against wicked people. It is not though a saga of “Good” and “Evil” because morality is scarcely involved. The righteous people are, by definition, the people who worship Yehouah, and the unrighteous worship other gods. Nothing has changed in the last 2000 years!

A Summary History of Palestine

The Jewish scriptures have totally distorted our view of ancient Palestinian history, which was far more complicated and had many more participants than just these two kingdoms. The Jewish scriptures never even explain how this territory got the name of Palestine (the land of the Philistines). Foreigners including Assyrian authors of royal annals and Herodotus knew the name of Palestine. Herodotus says Palestine is the part of Syria that is situated between Lebanon and Egypt.

The basis on which archaeologists found their theories can never be revisited. All excavations include—in Kathleen Kenyon’s words—destruction. The archaeologist destroys the evidence when it is excavated. The original archaeological situation can never be re-established. However, archaeologists continually formulate general hypotheses about the development of this geographic area in ancient times that speak against the evidence of a late written source such as the Jewish scriptures. This late source—although written—does not constitute a historical source.

Lemche explains that Palestine between, say 1250 and 900 BC is an example of this. Archaeology as well as other non-biblical information about ancient Palestine shows that Palestine in the late Bronze Age, roughly the 2nd half of the 2nd millennium BC, was an Egyptian province ruled by local princes who looked upon themselves as faithful vassals of their patron, the Pharaoh. Most of the time, Palestine was left alone. Only occasionally did the Egyptians interfere directly with the mundane problems of their colony. The constant internecine wars of the local chieftains who saw themselves as “kings” (the Egyptians called them *hazanu*, “mayors”) had a devastating effect on the wellbeing of the country. Not before the so-called “Ramesside restoration” of the Egyptian presence in Western Asia after the debacle that ended the 18th dynasty, did matters change and the Egyptian presence became more dominating. Ramesses II perhaps created a kind of “Pax Egyptiaca” in Palestine.

The Egyptians limited the devastating effects of “free-for-all” politics and created a situation of relative peace in the country that might have had a positive demographic effect as people moved from the cities to the countryside to live closer to their fields.

The late 13th, the 12th and the early 11th centuries BC were witnessing the foundations of scores if not hundreds of insignificant and unprotected village settlements, not least in the mountains of Palestine. Life must have become pretty safe. From at least the 11th century BC, a certain reduction of the number of villages took place. This demographic change was counterbalanced by the rise of some settlements to fortified townships. Tel Beersheba with its circular walls and planned layout is a typical example of such a settlement that may look more like a medieval fortress than a proper city or town.

This stage may have occurred as a consequence of an at least partial Egyptian withdrawal from Palestine, although at least in Bet Shean an Egyptian garrison remained to the beginning of the 10th century BC. Life became more dangerous and the socio-political system of the past—local patrons fighting other local patrons—emerged again. Lemche describes this as a move from one patronage society to another patronage society, from an old political system to a new system that was an exact copy of the former system. In the middle of the 9th century, some chieftains created larger political structures that eventually coalesced into the statelets of Israel and Judah, Moab, Edom, Ammon.

Thomas L Thompson has offered a series of principles that ought to be agreed by scholars who want to enquire into the history of Palestine and the bible. Thompson's full lists can be seen in his paper, available online:

- *A view from Copenhagen: Israel and the History of Palestine.*

Those who are sure they have God's authority behind them will disagree.

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Dr Michael David Magee

Michael D Magee was born in Hunslet, an industrial suburb of Leeds, Yorkshire, in 1941. He attended Cockburn High School in South Leeds. He won a studentship to the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, where he graduated with an honours degree in natural science in 1963. He went on to obtain a PhD degree from the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1967 and a teaching qualification, a PGCE, from Huddersfield before it was a university.

He carried out research at the Universities of Aston and Bradford, and at the Wool Industries Research Association, taught in a Further Education College in Devon for seven years and for ten years was an advisor to the UK government at the National Economic Development Office in London.

He has written three books, and, mainly in collaboration with Professor S Walker, a dozen scientific papers on the structure and interactions of small molecules investigated using microwave radiation. Working for the government he has written or edited some forty publications on microeconomic issues, and very many discussion papers and reports for the Sector Working Parties (SWPs) and Economic Development Committees (EDCs)—Wool Textiles, Man Made Fibres, Footwear and Electronics—of which he was secretary at various times in the 1980s.

He was brought up by Christian parents but was never indoctrinated into one dogma and was able from an early age to make his own judgements about the Christian religion.

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